



**REKO RENNIE:
PATTERNATION**



Reko Rennie pasting *Big red* on the Berlin Wall, 2009 (Photo Eva Galvin)

REKO RENNIE

Reko Rennie was born in Melbourne in 1974 and belongs to the Kamilaroi people from northern New South Wales. When he first discovered graffiti culture in the late 1980s, he became hooked and began an experimental apprenticeship on the streets of Melbourne teaching himself the necessary tools of the trade. In the following two decades, he honed his craft and developed a repertoire of intricate stencil imagery that is distinguished by its sampling of Aboriginal symbology, use of Australian native animals and flora, and integration of personal and national insignia. Prior to becoming an artist, Rennie worked as a print journalist for *The Age* newspaper, a career that exposed him to the myriad of political and social justice issues that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In fact, many of his early works of art incorporated images sourced directly from his time as a correspondent for the *Koori Mail*. Rennie's practice also explores the historical legacies of colonization, land rights, deaths in custody and identity politics.

In the current post-graffiti movement, the many manifestations of street art encompass stencilling, paste-ups, posters, stickers and murals. The growing art historical interest in the genre-busting arena of street art has prompted many street artists to reproduce their designs onto more permanent supports like sketchbooks, sheets of paper or canvas. Consequently, these artists have been invited to exhibit their work in commercial galleries, art museums and artist-run spaces. This process, however, is not without its critics

and many purists see it as the ultimate concession to a capitalist system. But arguably street art has always been about the work being seen, generating discussion and celebrating its aesthetic value. Working with and against these apparent contradictions, Rennie exploits the multitude of registers that an artist can inhabit. His art practice is defined not by its location but by its maker. And if graffiti culture is about anything it is about breaking the rules in order to remake them.

The slow acceptance of street art echoes the early critical reception of Indigenous art. Both art forms often struggle with the marginality imposed on them. This cultural invisibility lends itself to the depoliticization of already marginalized peoples. The title *Patternation* refers not just to the repeated geometric patterns that often appear in Reko Rennie's work, but to the rhetoricized and contrived "patter" of Australian national discourse which purports to value Indigenous peoples, but simultaneously consigns them to accept social disadvantage as a part of everyday life. Political posturing hasn't changed the fact that the economic, health, and educational indicators for Aboriginal people are still far below those of most Australians. And as Tom Calma, former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner said, "it is not credible to suggest that one of the wealthiest nations of the world cannot solve a crisis affecting less than 3% of its citizens."¹

In the USA, political sovereignty and quasi-dual citizenship has helped preserve the cultural integrity of American Indian communities and empowered them to make decisions in accordance with their cultural, social, philosophical, linguistic, educational and financial needs. Despite the overwhelming benefits of this administrative agreement, especially considering the history of forced integration through the Indian termination policy, it nevertheless has a strong isolationist dimension which is manifested both geographically and symbolically. Arguably, this has contributed to the near invisibility of American Indians in national debates and cultural texts. This conspicuous absence has naturalized a default disengagement with American Indian peoples and issues. Many people even lack the vocabulary to address American Indian peoples,



Urban Aboriginal, 2009 (Photo Reko Rennie)

which is emblematic of an inability to both articulate the traumatic history of this continent and to negotiate a future of cultural coexistence.

In 2007, the four member states that voted against the United Nation's historic 2007 Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples were Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA. Citing reservations about the incompatibility of self-determination models within constitutional democracies, these four countries revealed their continued domestic and international interests in the systemic discrimination of the world's estimated 370 million Indigenous peoples. While Australia eventually ratified the Declaration in 2009, it was finally endorsed in 2010 by New Zealand in April, Canada in November and the USA in December. What was most significant about the last of these ratifications was that there was virtually no mainstream media coverage of it.

In Australia, the interconnected but distinct cultural policies of Reconciliation and Multi-culturalism

are the political and foundational ideologies on which the country understands and models its past, present and future. Reconciliation as a national aspiration gives a name to Australia's anxieties about historical Aboriginal displacement and contemporary inequalities, while proposing a symbolic and practical paradigm to address it. The National Apology to Indigenous people on 13 February 2008 by former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, was a watershed moment in Australian history and defines the current political trend of reconciliation between Indigenous people and all Australians. The bipartisan apology marked the beginning of a "new chapter" and gestured towards "national healing". Despite the admirable motives of reconciliation, the centrality of "white guilt" is implicit within its discourse. Until the need for absolution is subordinated to an activist agenda of social transformation and justice, reconciliation will be doomed to fail and it will be Aboriginal people who pay the price.

Despite the widely held perception that Aboriginal people predominantly live in areas termed "remote", the largest concentration of

Aboriginal communities are in cities and towns along the eastern seaboard of Australia. Disassociating Aboriginal people from these urban centres is a way to erode their cultural and historical legitimacy and to reinscribe these spaces as wholly Australian. This process neutralizes anxieties about the precariousness of the Australian nation state and absolves Australians from thinking about who once belonged to or cared for the land. Combating this cultural invisibility, Rennie's kangaroo assumes a powerfully totemic signification for Aboriginal peoples living in the urban landscape.

The Australian coat of arms features a kangaroo, one of Australia's national symbols. Despite the harsh Australian environment and significant encroachments on their habitat, kangaroo populations have escaped the endangered status that affects many other Australian animals. Seeing analogies with the post-colonial experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Rennie's kangaroo becomes a symbol of Aboriginal survival and invincibility. The choice of the red kangaroo, the largest of all the different species, is not accidental. Rennie's *Big red* kangaroo has an incredible three-dimensionality, which heightens its towering monumentality and shocks with its changing palette of saturated and fluorescent color in various reproductions. More than two meters tall, *Big red* confronts the viewer in its confident upright physicality, staking a powerful and irrevocable claim to city space.

Indexed to the regulation of cultural and physical space, motifs of control and confrontation are also common in Rennie's practice. His use of the chain is a potent symbol of the history of police brutality. It reminds us of the distressing late nineteenth and early twentieth century photographs of Aboriginal men with chains around their necks, convicted of killing the cattle that had displaced them from their own customary lands. Rennie alludes to a similar judicial injustice which continues into the twenty-first century in the disproportionately high rate of Aboriginal incarceration. Aboriginal people are seventeen times more likely to be imprisoned than



Urban Guerrilla #1, 2007 (Photo Reko Rennie)



Shield, 2009 (Photo Reko Rennie)

the wider Australian population, and receive longer sentences for lesser crimes.

The government's monopoly on the legitimate and increasing means of violence against its own citizens shows that modalities of resistance have become harder, but not impossible, to enact. The stencil of the *Urban Aboriginal* with his spear poised for release can be read as a powerful sign of figurative resistance and an embracing of the materiality of one's own culture. Similarly, Rennie's series of shields speaks to degrees of literal resistance. In both their offensive and defensive capacity, shields bore witness to the onslaught of colonialism when the arrival of Europeans provoked protracted warfare over contested lands. Rennie's allusive works hint at the physical and symbolic struggles that Aboriginal people have experienced and continue to experience.

Like much street art, Rennie's work has a strong autographic quality. The concentric diamond motif is a cultural identifier of the Kamilaroi people and wooden objects, like shields, would have historically been incised with this design. While the graphic simplicity of this design makes it perfect for

stencilling, it is a model that speaks to the cultural complexity of Kamilaroi familial and gendered relations. Remixing Aboriginal symbology with secular icons, Rennie creates a hybrid visual language with which he can resist the fixity of false identity constructions in relation to Aboriginal people, art and culture, while mobilizing a new one. Embodying the easy duality of his contemporary Aboriginal identity, his Kamilaroi iconography beats in perfect cadence with and for his art and life practice. These mash-ups are fundamental to graffiti culture, but they are also key to understanding Rennie's politics and his articulation of the tensions of being an urban Aboriginal man in contemporary society.

As always, the burden of representation falls heavily on peoples who have historically been spoken for and these representations need to be divested of their ideological function through artistic, cultural, academic and political interventions. Ella Shoat wrote, "each filmic or academic utterance must be analyzed not only in terms of who represents but also in terms of who is being represented for what purpose, at which historical moment, for which location, using which strategies, and in what tone of address."² Like a deep scratch on a vinyl album, the work of artist activists must subvert the long play record of Australian mythology. Using the same tools of reiteration and restatement that have been successfully used by colonial powers, artists must accept that one's art practice is indivisible from one's life practice and that a high degree of repetition is part of the commitment to undoing the political patterns of the Australian nation.

Stephen Gilchrist

- 1 Calma, Tom, The Australian Human Rights Commission 7 Dec. 2010 <http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/health/index.html>
- 2 Ella Shoat, "The Struggle over Representation: Casting, Coalitions, and the Politics of Identification," in *Late Imperial Culture*, Román De la Campa ; E Kaplan ; Michael Sprinker Verso: London ; New York, 1995 , p 173.



400 Worrell Drive
Peter Jefferson Place
Charlottesville, Virginia 22911

Public Gallery Hours:
Tuesday to Saturday 10 am to 4 pm
Sunday 1 to 5 pm

Free Guided Tour:
Saturday 10:30 am

REKO RENNIE: PATTERNATION

Curated by Stephen Gilchrist
January 28 – April 4, 2011

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BEYOND WALLS SYMPOSIUM

Friday, January 28, 9:30 am - 12:30 pm
Campbell Hall 153

SPEAKERS:

Reko Rennie (Kamilaroi/Gamilaraay/Gummaroi)
Frank Buffalo Hyde (Nez Perce/Onondaga)
Dean Dass, McIntire Department of Art, UVa

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THE BRIDGE PROGRESSIVE ARTS INITIATIVE

Reko Rennie and Frank Buffalo Hyde have been commissioned to create a collaborative painting for the exterior wall of The Bridge PAI in Charlottesville. They will work on the painting January 25 – 27 and it will be installed and unveiled at a later date.

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