

NGV My Country: New Exhibition Shows the Power of Mentorship

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Art by Johnathon World Peace Bush, inside the My Country exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria. Image credit: Tom Ross

A new First Nations art exhibition at the NGV shows the immeasurable power of mentorship

Jonah Waterhouse 4 Apr 2024

The National Gallery of Victoria (NGV)'s latest exhibition pairs First Nations artists with established mentors, culminating in works that share tales old and new.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this story contains names of deceased persons.

What is art if it doesn't tell a story? In the context of the extensive history of First Nations cultures in Australia, art has become a way of preserving the past, ensuring customs and artistic techniques are kept alive for generations to follow.

The importance of mentorship in First Nations cultures is the focal point of *My Country*, the NGV's newest exhibition, which pairs an emerging First Nations artist from each state across Australia with an established mentor, to help further their artistic practice. Take the artist Johnathon World Peace Bush, also known as 'Jon Jon'; born and raised in the Tiwi Islands north of Darwin, Bush has seen the effects of modern-day colonisation on his native Wulirankuwu Country. Stories of the land are depicted in corresponding artworks, made with the guidance of artist and Melville Island resident Pedro Wonaemirri, who helped him bring the vision of his ancestral lands to life.

"There's no place like home, [and] if you don't know your roots, you don't know the future," Bush says of growing up in the Tiwi Islands in the '80s, a place without electricity, running water and connections to the outside world. "The glimpses and memories of the past, growing up in the islands—I went from a boy to a man, and now I've got grandchildren."

Pedro Wonaemirri and Johnathon World Peace Bush, in front of the latter's artwork for My Country. Image credit: Jacinta Keefe



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Bush's early life was filled with the stories of his ancestors. There are nuns in his paintings, depicting the arrival of Catholicism in the Tiwi Islands, and more specifically the forced removal of his grandfather from the ancestral lands of Paluwiyanga by pastoralist Joe Cooper, the figure depicted on horseback. "The Catholics came, but we had our own

culture, holding western laws and Aboriginal laws to build bridges [between them].” In Bush’s paintings, Christian imagery is juxtaposed with ancestral stories from his home using ochre, an earthy pigment with a yellow-brown hue that comes from the land.

That reverence for his ancestral home is extended in the audio-visual component of his artwork, which features Bush dancing on Wulirankuwu country while Wonaemirri sings. “Pedro told me to do my best and do my own style—I’m not copying anyone, I’m just doing my thing,” he notes. “It’s taken me six or seven years until I got my pattern and routine [right].” Bush’s brushstrokes have always been instantly recognisable, but in his words, the mentorship process has only strengthened his approach.

Bush’s creative process up close. Image credit: courtesy NGV



The duo in the Tiwi Islands. Image credit: courtesy NGV



A reverence for home extends to Gamilaroi Ynarr textile artist Sophie Honess, whose hand-stitched art depicts the unique and formidable beauty of the land surrounding Tamworth in central New South Wales, where she was raised. Through her work, *Daruka* – *grass, water, granite*—a set of three textile pieces that incorporate over 80,000 individual stitches and her signature weaving technique—Honess has reclaimed a fear of the land she once had as a child, through art that depicts its wild beauty.

“I’ve always been inspired by my Country, [and] always draw inspiration from it in colour and texture—that’s what Country is,” Honess says. “But it’s my personal journey I want to keep sharing.”

Honess and her mentor, Jonathan Jones. Image credit: Jacinta Keefe



Up-close details of Honess's weaving. Image credit: Jacquie Manning



The finished hand-stitched pieces, which are meant to be interpreted together, evoke the arid and unpredictable environment through vivid colours and patterns. The artist and Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi man Jonathan Jones served as Honess's mentor and encouraged her to bring an element of her personal experience. In *Daruka – grass, water, granite*, Honess explored her kinship with the land she was raised on, which like much of

New South Wales, has experienced devastating effects of colonialism and more recently, climate change. “I’m in a spot right now where I love it, and am not sad when I go there,” she says of recent trips home, which have signalled a change in perspective. Honess once “grieved with Country” but says the process of creation and collaboration has provided new inspiration for the future. “I used to have anger, and sadness, but doing this work and being able to go there so often and have time there by myself, I found peace,” she shares.

Image credit: Jacquie Manning

Honess and Bush are just two of the eight mentees who collaborated with mentors for the exhibition. Each artist uses a different audio-visual or craftsmanship technique in their work, weaving together a unique patchwork of First Nations talent from across Australia—and proves that art, in its own way, can tell countless stories. You can read the whole list of artists, and their mentors, [here](#).

My Country: The Country Road + NGV First Nations Commissions is open now at the NGV and runs until August 4, 2024. Read more at the [NGV website](#).