Bilya Wongka (River Story)

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Kallon Yulmach Cummings
Acrylic on canvas, 2026

Kallon paints using traditional symbolism and says “I’ve done the symbols representing the parents; I’ve done the children here swimming with water flow. Obviously, the water is the blue through the picture, but the overall symbol is the centre with lines coming out; that’s the actual symbol for waterhole, so waterhole, river, so that’s the symbolic representation I’ve gone for.

On the two sides here that’s the representation of the dismembered leg in a boot and I’ve done the red, the grey, the white and the black ‘cos I’ve gone for that ghoulish conceptual representation of blood and flesh and you can see it all interconnects with the actual river itself.
To me that’s a representation of the dark history of York. You know something like that happened in York and you also have children swimming in the same river. I didn’t really feel like realism was the way to go, this is the first time I’ve ever painted a story like that ever, so it was fun, it was intriguing, I think putting the two different stories on one canvas was a little bit challenging but I love challenges at the end of the day.

If you look at the river from a bird's eye view, there’s a lot of green shrubs and bushes there, so I’ve incorporated that on both sides. Without that river running through you wouldn’t have a lot of wildflowers, trees, shrubs surviving the way they do. Going back to the wildflowers, as we know there’s a lot of wildflowers running through.
But also, you know it’s an artistic flow and I’m really big on symmetry, and that’s just the way I paint. Because Noongar people, we have lost a lot of language, a lot of cultural identity due not only to the murdering and pillaging in the past, but it was also more like you can’t practise this, or you can’t be like this anymore, you have to become westernised. And this is why I paint – it’s because this teaches me about country, about the meaning of sites, and that’s what our culture is essentially about, continuity, survivability and I’d say, adaptation.

We view water sources as sacred so you weren’t allowed to poison those water sources, it was sacrilege, in its own way, because water was the most important thing.
You look at the Avon River today and you can see the pollution, the colour of it”.