WEARING HIS OWN CROWN
REGARDLESS OF SIZE AND LOCATION, RENNIE’S PROJECTS REMAIN POLITICAL AND SHINE A LIGHT ON THE RICHNESS OF ABORIGINAL CULTURE. MOST IMPORTANTLY, HIS WORK ENABLES HIM TO CONTINUE TO EXPLORE WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN ABORIGINAL MAN IN TODAY’S URBAN AUSTRALIA.

Reko Rennie’s 2013 video work *Home sweet home* starts with images of his teenage home turf, the eclectic Melbourne suburb of Footscray. The viewer is led through an underpass to the platform of Middle Footscray train station before being introduced to the tracks and a fleet of old freight trains, each carriage grafﬁttied with tags, ﬂuorescent paintings and Rennie’s regalia symbols: the crown, the diamond and the Indigenous ﬂag. The video then moves to the streets where the same grafﬁti ﬂourishes on desolate buildings — a nod to the suburb’s working class roots and the rich street culture that is a permanent fixture out west. This urban heartland soon gives way to Gamilaroi country in New South Wales, the traditional lands of Rennie’s people, before ending in the spiritual heartland of Indigenous Australia, the desert, in this case the lands around Fitzroy Crossing, Western Australia. *Home sweet home* says much about Rennie — his upbringing, his identity, and his place in the much larger story of Aboriginal Australia.

But it is the work’s introductory image of a shelf holding hundreds of spray cans that says most about the development of Reko Rennie as an artist.

Rennie is a self-taught artist who created his distinctive aesthetic on the streets. Like many who ply their trade with spray cans on the sides of buildings, in alleyways and on trains, Rennie was enthralled by the possibility of creating truly democratic art: art that could be seen by the masses, give voice and identity to its creators, and be part of broader conversations. He was also aware that particular inherent qualities of street art — the illegality and spontaneity of the work, the immediate engagement with drugs and trouble with the law were a feature of his social scene. More confrontingly, images of syringes, switchblade knives and tapes reference Rennie’s love of hip-hop music and street culture. The viewer is led through an underpass to the platform of Middle Footscray train station before being introduced to the tracks and a fleet of old freight trains, each carriage grafﬁttied with tags, ﬂuorescent paintings and Rennie’s regalia symbols: the crown, the diamond and the Indigenous ﬂag. The video then moves to the streets where the same grafﬁti ﬂourishes on desolate buildings — a nod to the suburb’s working class roots and the rich street culture that is a permanent fixture out west. This urban heartland soon gives way to Gamilaroi country in New South Wales, the traditional lands of Rennie’s people, before ending in the spiritual heartland of Indigenous Australia, the desert, in this case the lands around Fitzroy Crossing, Western Australia. *Home sweet home* says much about Rennie — his upbringing, his identity, and his place in the much larger story of Aboriginal Australia.

The exploration of personal identity has been a central pillar of Rennie’s work, and is clearly evident in his continued use of the geometric diamond design. Described as a type of coat of arms by Rennie, it represents his Indigenous heritage. The hypercolour rendering articulates his urban upbringing and declares proudly that he is part of a living, continually developing culture, not one that is static and deﬁned by the ‘noble savage’ narrative. The contemporary treatment of this sacred design reveals the level of self-investigation in Rennie’s work and his search to ﬁnd a place for himself in an urban environment as an Aboriginal man.

More recently, his use of pop-style imagery, such as that seen in his 2013 exhibition ‘King and Country’ at Melbourne’s Karen Woodbury Gallery, explores his ten years in the western suburbs of Melbourne. Drawings of BMX bikes, spray cans and mixed-tapes reference Rennie’s love of hip-hop music and street culture. More confronting, images of syringes, switchblade knives and handcuffs highlight the reality of his adolescence where violence, drugs and trouble with the law were a feature of his social scene. Viewed as a whole, these personal images allude to an urban rite of passage experienced by Rennie and many other young males. They are a constant reminder of the path that he was treading...
Home sweet home, 2013
Single-channel HD video, 8 minute duration
Courtesy the artist and Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne
and its potentially destructive outcomes. They are also, as the artist himself described, powerful symbols that reflect ‘identity, affiliation and pop culture psyche’: code for a description of self.

Throughout his practice Rennie has called on images of native Australian fauna and flora to represent Indigenous Australia’s enduring connection to country. The echidna, the sulphur-crested cockatoo, the emu and the eucalyptus tree have all been depicted in fluorescent colours, even the largest of all kangaroos, the big red. A native animal that dominates Australia’s coat of arms, the red kangaroo has become a key symbol of our national identity. But Rennie’s use of it, and of other similar icons, reclaims the symbol as part of Indigenous culture and memory, a process that reaffirms the function of plants and animals as important totemic signifiers and celebrates their role in Indigenous storytelling and understanding of country.

In her newly published book Street Art, Public City, Law, Crime and the Urban Imagination, Alison Young argues that street art ‘is capable of communicating on many levels: as a political device, inviting reflection in attitudes with a view to social change.’1 Rennie has placed this ethos firmly at the centre of his raison d’être as a contemporary artist. His art is and always has been unashamedly political. In 2012 he embellished the exterior of a three-storey building in Taylor Square, Sydney, with a vivid pink diamond design. The pattern wraps around the façade and is accompanied by a neon sign proclaiming ‘Always was, always will be’, a statement of intent that features in other works by Rennie, reminding the public that this building located in the heart of Sydney stands on Gadigal country. A two-year work in Washington DC, similarly stakes a claim of ownership and recognition, not just for Australian Aboriginal people but for all displaced Indigenous people. Across a 5-metre expanse bold capital letters infilled with diamonds spell out the simple message ‘Remember me’. A second layer of text, made from neon, proclaims with authority ‘The original people’.

This notion of original land ownership – a challenge to the acceptance of dispossession – is also seen in Rennie’s repurposing of the Australian coat of arms and the humble postage stamp, both symbols of colonisation. In Rennie’s coat of arms the emblems of the states and territories are replaced with a single image of an Aboriginal man. The word ‘Australia’ has been exchanged for ‘Aboriginal’, stating with ambiguity that life existed prior to the arrival of the First Fleet. The remaking of a large postage stamp as a stencil and paste-up asserts ownership of this portrait of an Aboriginal man, originally used without permission as part of colonial Australia’s nation-building project.

The many threads and interests that define Rennie’s practice have recently coalesced in his triad of symbols: the crown, the diamond and the Aboriginal flag. Hand-drawn in appearance, they are personal markers like graffiti tags, the artist’s signature: the crown pays homage to his graffiti roots but most importantly reaffirms Aboriginal people as the original sovereigns of this country; the diamond identifies Rennie as part of the Kamilaroi/Gamilaroi community; while the Aboriginal flag pays respect to all Aboriginal people. Combined they are ‘an emblematic statement about the original royalty of Australia’.2 In Home sweet home, the video discussed at the beginning of this essay, Rennie inscribes these symbols into the rich red earth of the Australian interior; soon after, his hand wipes them away leaving only an abstract reminder of human presence. This simple act speaks of the resilience of Indigenous Australians, who continue to have a physical and spiritual presence in the land. Likewise, the removal of Rennie’s imprint is a reminder to walk lightly, respectful both of the land and of those who came before.

Rennie’s practice has developed in a somewhat circular trajectory that has seen him make works in public spaces, for the gallery and for public spaces again. He continues to oscillate between these places of reception, indicating both his flexibility as an artist and his commitment to explore his personal history and place in the world. Consistent throughout has been his street-art aesthetic and the conceptual framework that drives him. Regardless of size and location, Rennie’s projects remain political and shine a light on the richness of Aboriginal culture. Most importantly, his work enables him to continue to explore what it means to be an Aboriginal man in today’s urban Australia. Rennie has declared that he doesn’t have an issue with his identity, even though others do: ‘I’m comfortable with who I am, where I’m from, and hopefully my work shows that’. Throughout his career he has maintained such a position, one that he poignantly and authoritatively declared in a 2013 neon work that simply read, in all its glorious glowing red and yellow, ‘I near my own crown’.


2 Alison Young, Street Art, Public City, Law, Crime and the Urban Imagination, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon. 2013, p. 15.