

REKOSPECTIVE

■ Jirra Lulla Harvey

Whether graffiti 'bombing' trains or exhibiting in Paris, self-taught artist Reko Rennie has been exploring the themes of rebellion and resistance since his early teens. "Graffiti was the medium to express myself as a young angry kid and later those skills acquired from the street enabled me to express my identity and use art as a powerful medium."

Rennie is a Kamilaroi man who, through his art practice, represents both his ancestral home in New South Wales and his birthplace, the city of Melbourne. His work revolves around visual motifs including a geometric patterning that is a contemporary manifestation of Kamilaroi tradition. Rennie has created his own visual language that simultaneously communicates respect for tradition, while defying the simplistic assumption that Aboriginal identity is connected only to the past.

"I grew up in the city, I have that connection. I cannot recreate traditional practices but what I can do, is draw from my own experiences and express my identity from what I know. I am an urban Aboriginal man, I am comfortable with my identity and this is what I try to show through my work."

Rennie communicates a deep respect for the pioneers of the graffiti art movement while resisting the contemporary label of street artist. The scale of works such as *Remember Me – The Original People* which is 9 feet high by nearly 60 feet long (2.7 x 18.2 metres) and was created for the 5 x 5 project in Washington DC mimics the shape and powerful size of early works created on New York trains. Rennie has built on his training as an outdoor site-specific artist with commissions such as *OA NDN - Original Aboriginal Indian*, a

collaboration with artist Frank Buffalo Hyde at the Museum of Contemporary Native Art in Santa Fe in California. His experiments with new mediums such as etching, neon lights and video production assert that no creative practice should remain static.

Growing up in the multicultural mecca of Footscray in Melbourne's western suburbs, Rennie was drawn to the hip hop movement. New York artists of the time were spitting subversive tales of cultural resistance, of Black pride, and of fighting against oppressive social structures. Rennie was listening. He became immersed in the subculture and often speaks of a pivotal day when he discovered at his local library the publication *Subway Art*. Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant's ground-breaking book was the first to document the work of graffiti writers as an art form. Rennie was amazed at seeing hundreds of painted New York trains, and from that moment on, street art became a passion.

Rennie's attraction to the renegade nature of graffiti art is multi-layered. Works such as *Rekospective 2011* draw connections between the anti-establishment attitudes of the street art movement and Aboriginal people's fight to break free from the shackles of paternalism. The subtext to such work is a running narrative on government practices that work to control and restrain Aboriginal communities and the subsequent rebellion of the people. "I was inspired by the struggle."

Rekospective 2011's central warrior figure has become an emblem for resistance. He is stenciled in trendy Melbourne laneways wielding either a spear or nulla nulla (a battle club). The original image is no single person but rather a representative figure that has evolved from Rennie's own family history. His face is based loosely on Rennie's father and his reclamation of city streets can be read as an ode to his great-uncle Reginald Murray. Reginald Murray was a force in Walgett where he fought against the curfew that prohibited Aboriginal people from entering the town after six o'clock at night. Police enforced the curfew with the assistance of local vigilante groups on horseback wielding hobble chains and whips.¹ "My Uncle wasn't having any of that."

The complex relationship between crime and resistance has been an ongoing theme in Rennie's career. His creative practice began as an illegal street artist and before becoming a full-time artist he worked for several years at *The Age* as a crime reporter. He would file reports through the day and paint all night.

The catalyst for Rennie to make the break with journalism came when he was awarded the 2009 Australian Council of the Arts residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris. At the same time he gained commercial representation and



The artist Reko Rennie in front of the site-specific installation *Always Was Always Will Be* at the intersection of Oxford St and Flinders St, Darlinghurst, Sydney, 2012. Photo: Søren Solkær Starbird.

Reko Rennie *Urban Aboriginal 2009*, stencil on paper – paste-up, Hosier Lane, Melbourne. Courtesy of the artist and Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne.



his first institutional acquisition. "These were the confidence boosts that I needed to take that leap."

While completing his 3 month residency in Paris, Rennie flew to Germany to paint a part of the former Berlin Wall and visited London to put up one of his signature *Big Reds* in Grimsby Street off Brick Lane, where famous street artist Banksy had made a lot of his early work. He spent much of last year in New York, where he exhibited and gave lectures as a part of the prestigious *Scope Art Fair*.

While Rennie is inspired by the international attention, it is the local site-specific commissions such as *Always was, Always will be* and community projects like *Welcome to Redfern* in the historically significant Aboriginal hub of Redfern that humbles him. He is passionate about creating connections with Aboriginal youth and spends a minimum of one month per year running community workshops. Over one third of the Aboriginal population lives in major cities and the majority of the population is under the age of 25.² *Always was, Always will be* speaks almost directly to this demographic whose cultural identity is centered on urban political activism. The façade of the Taylor Square building is painted in popping colours and geometric diamonds referencing the traditional markings of the Kamilaroi people and across the front of the building the title is spelled out in neon. This is arguably the slogan of an urban generation; burnt into the memory of anyone that has walked a NAIDOC march or attended an Aboriginal protest in the last 30 years. As a temporary work in an urban context Rennie makes further comment that while urban structures come and go, Sydney will always be Gadigal country.

The geometric patterns that feature so strongly in Rennie's work are for Kamilaroi people a visual language that was once integral to keeping records of marriage lines, family groups and territorial boundaries. They featured in sand paintings for ceremony and tree carvings to mark sites of significance. Young men were given their own design as part of their initiation into manhood.³ The patterning is, like so many of Rennie's motifs, a representation of Aboriginal identity.

Another motif that expresses contemporary Aboriginal identity and the historical frameworks that have impacted its construction is the stamp motif featured in *Patternation, Rekospective 2011* and the body of work created for the *Scope Art Fair* in New York. The stamp features a portrait of Gwoja Tjungarrayi who became known as "One Pound Jimmy". A hundred million of these stamps were sold between 1949 and 1965 and were sent to countries all over the world. It is an early example of the tourism market framing an Aboriginal man as a noble yet silent symbol of Australia. Tjungarrayi's image was exploited to sell exoticism and exported across the globe, while Tjungarrayi himself was ineligible for a passport because the Australian government had yet to recognise him as a citizen. By re-contextualising the One Pound Jimmy stamp Rennie calls on audiences to consider why the Aboriginal icons used to solidify a unique national identity almost always remained unidentified.

Twisting and challenging this mentality, Rennie positions *Big Red* as another symbol of resistance. In contemporary Australian society the kangaroo is viewed with duality, both as a symbol of national pride and as a pest. Since

British colonisation the kangaroo population has increased in numbers. The fences used to divide and conquer the Australian landscape cannot confine the kangaroo because they simply bound over them. A herd, commonly called a "mob" of kangaroos are always led by a large, dominant male. He stands slightly apart from the group, always on watch for danger. He is first to attack and the first to tell the mob to move on; he is the protector, the leader, he is Big Red.

Rennie's visual language reclaims the native emblems of Australia. These icons, viewed by themselves conjure images of a wild land, made up of outback stations and remote Aboriginal communities. In this romantic, dust-covered Australia there is no place for an urban Aboriginal presence. When Rennie re-contextualises these icons, including them in his own urban language of neon colours and brick backdrops, their meaning shifts. A kitsch representation of an unidentified man becomes an ode to proud ancestors. A Red Kangaroo, so quintessentially Australian, stands with ease on the Berlin Wall. By bringing motifs of the past into the present, Rennie's visual language defies simplistic assumptions by showing cultural identity as a non-linear journey. ■

1 www.dharriwaaidersgroup.org.au

2 www.abs.gov.au

3 <http://www.au.timeout.com/sydney/art/events/24779/carved-trees-aboriginal-cultures-of-west-nsw#picture0>



Reko Rennie Above: *Trust The 2%* 2012, neon and perspex, exhibited at Gertrude Contemporary, Fitzroy. Courtesy the artist. Courtesy the artist and Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne.



Reko Rennie ABOVE: *Patternation* 2011, (installation view), curated by Stephen Gilchrist, Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, University of Virginia, USA. Courtesy the artist.
BELOW: *Always Was Always Will Be* 2012, site specific, acrylic paint, neon and aluminium, intersection of Oxford St and Flinders St, Darlinghurst, Sydney. Courtesy of the artist and Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne.

