

LEANNE TOBIN

NGALAWAN: WE LIVE. WE REMAIN.



LEWERS: PENRITH REGIONAL GALLERY



NGALAWAN: WE LIVE. WE REMAIN.

written by Coby Edgar

The first time I met Aunty Leanne Tobin was when I was asked to host a discussion with her about her public art. The participants all sat on kangaroo skins buffering their bodies from the cold concrete floor smack bang in the centre of the cityscape. Their hands were busy weaving colourful circles with their eyes mostly cast downward at their work while they listened. I remember the moment when she got a little glint in her eyes as she saw the pathway my line of questioning was leading her down. ‘Cheeky girl, clever girl’ her eyes said as I led her down the path. She shifted in her seat, turned to Nicole Monks who had programmed our chat and gave her a look of ‘who did you set me up with?’ When shifted back to me, her body told me, ‘Ok, let’s go girl.’

Aunty Leanne saw the light in me, highlighting the pathway towards the core of her practice like dappled sunlight shining through the bush signalling the way forward. We are both Willy Wagtails, messenger birds who are known for bringing a message to be interpreted, but we can also be cheeky and it is not advised to follow us into the bush. After that day she slowly showed me her world, told me her stories and we developed a special synergy. We spent hours chatting about history, Country, people and connections.

Leanne has ancestors that are Irish, English and First Nations. With her heritage descending from the Greater Sydney region, the Buruberong and Wumali clans of the Dharug. The Dharug peoples’ story starts well before

tall ships sailed into the harbour and eventually travelling up the Parramatta and Hawkesbury rivers but it is the arrival of the tall ships on her Country and what has happened since then that is evidenced in the state records but is still widely unknown by the general public that she is passionate about sharing. If everyone saw Country as kin like Leanne does, it would ensure its health and existence into the future and that is why her work is centred around custodianship of Country, caring for and nurturing our environments for perpetuity. Sometimes we forget that we are part of the ecosystem and not the makers of it; Leanne’s work seeks to remind us of this.

Her ancestor Bulunggayi, Maria Lock (c.1806-1878) the daughter of Yarramundi a renowned Garadji (healer), was initially married to Dickie (Thomas Walker Coke) (c.1804-1823), the son of Woollarawarre Bennelong (c.1762-1813), who sadly passed some weeks after they married. Bulunggayi Maria was the first Aboriginal woman to be given a land grant and to legally marry an Anglo man, Robert Lock (1800-1854), in Australia. He was an illiterate carpenter who helped to build the Blacktown Native Institute. His wife learnt to read and write at the neighbouring Parramatta Native Institute where she was top of her class at graduation. These institutions were the origin of nationwide assimilation and cultural oppression under the guise of ‘education’ of First Nations children and the first occurrence of what we now call the Stolen Generations. Together they had ten children and she lived a long and active life leaving behind a legacy of descendants that number in the thousands today.

It should be no big surprise given the extensive efforts taken to oppress and force assimilation through strategies like criminalising language and ceremony of First Nations people for literally hundreds of years that Leanne had no knowledge of her ancestors as a child and into her young adult years. Her grandmother Kathleen (Flo) had kept her family stories close to her heart and did not share those stories. The processes of colonialism are forever changing and ongoing, and the violence of it is well and truly alive. But for Leanne's family it started with Yarramundi surviving smallpox (galgala) and the obliteration and assimilation of her people through forced learning of foreign ways of being. Maria was able to use this to her advantage by writing on behalf and of her illiterate husband to petition for and receive promised land grants.

In the 1980s Leanne trained as a teacher in New South Wales and worked across Queensland, New South Wales and the Northern Territory. It was during her first appointment as a teacher in Kakadu in the uranium mining township of Jabiru where Leanne was sitting outside in a reading circle with the children that an older Auntie seated with her, walked up to her, poked her in the arm and said "You're not all white". Serendipitously her maternal cousin was busy researching their family tree. A phone call came and the family secrets Kathleen had guarded were revealed. The veil of time had lifted and Leanne's world pivoted on its axis. She immersed herself in culture that surrounded her and started digging for the answer to seemingly simple questions that niggled at her like mosquitos in the wet season.

When Leanne moved back to New South Wales, she worked at Hawkesbury Western Sydney University Aboriginal Education Unit as a research assistant for Auntie Pearl Wynmarra. Auntie Pearl had won a Teacher of Excellence award and with the money created a part time position for Leanne, propelling her learning journey forward.

Leanne went digging and a cascade of stories fell out of the archives. She began to remove the veils of history that lingered like fog on the river in the early morning hours. She sat in her nawi (canoe) and started paddling through time as she fingered through pages of evidence. Slowly the sun began to break up the fog that hovered above the waters and the river revealed its winding pathways. Leanne returned home and found herself through the words of those who observed and recorded her ancestors and through meeting other Dharug peoples who she was later able to locate within her family tree. Warami.

Ngälawan: We Live. We Remain is the culmination of over three decades of looking inwards and slowly weaving a net of stories of people and place that hold culture in motion. Leanne's work is not that of a conceptual artist, she doesn't want her people to have to dig for the answers. She paints pictorially. There isn't a key needed to decipher any of her works. She uses art as a teaching and learning tool, changing her medium to best get across her messages.

If she has a mural on a school wall along a river, the work is going to tell you about that river. If she is commissioned to make a work for a gallery in the mountains, you bet it is going to be a work about the mountains. Some may find her work too literal, and often mistake it as simple but when the stories of people and place have been buried and written over for generations, she needs to be as direct as possible. Her work has never been about the 'art world', it's about sharing cultural values and stories of place. When her ancestors have been made invisible to their own descendants, Leanne's family portraits of Maria, Lorna, Kathleen, Nurragingy and *Bungaree* along with self-portraits are acts of defiance. Learning that the river Paramatta is taken from the Dharug word Baramada which means the place where the eel lays down and is where these descendants of Gurangady (an eel-like ancestral being) that migrates from Dharug Ngura all the way to the

Coral Sea and back again. Gurrangady is the Creator Ancestor who created the landscape as a result of a ferocious chase that took place back in during the time of creation. The Bara are seen as Gurrangady's descendants. The Bara are cyclic, migrating to the Coral Sea where they breed and die, with their young returning. They literally changed their colouring to survive the environments they traverse though on their journey- is complex enough, right?

Ngalawan: We Live. We Remain, is her first survey. Leanne's work transforms to suit the environments they are made for, just like the eels. She has works that are in bronze, hand-blown glass, clay, polymers on canvas, murals painted on school walls, metal sculptures, works etched into the bricks on buildings, digitally animated works. She is currently in the final stages of finessing a play about Bulunggayi (Maria) that she has lovingly been crafting for 12 years. It's a piece of her heart that she has worked and reworked to make sure it is perfect. What you see in this gallery is just the introduction to her Dharug Ngura. Go find her ancestors' stories in the landscape, floating gently along the rivers and standing tall in the mountains. Trace the eel's journey, understand why the waratah is red. She left you all the clues in this city you too call home because she wants you to treat it like kin - not like a fleeting visitor.

Every single human has a story and no one escapes the reality of the dark chapters that were written before we became the inheritors of these stories. Sometimes we can get lost in the darkness. Sometimes we rip those pages up and deny they were there and rename the animals, plants, parks, rivers, mountains and people. Sometimes we suffer from prolonged amnesia and have no clue that we do. If you meet Leanne's story and her work eye to eye she has the capacity to shine light on the darkest parts of our nations' shared history. She invites you into her world to learn with her as she reacquaints herself with the stories that have been hidden under the concrete slabs, roads and buildings

that the processes of colonisation erased from our collective conscious.

She does it because when you get to know the rivers' name, you get to know where the river started and where it's going. Then you can sit yourself there, next to that river and start to shine light on how you too came to be here. Put yourself in relation and become kin with the land and waters you call home but haven't really met properly yet. The current world climate demands that we pay attention to the world around us. The way out of our food crisis, climate catastrophes and even housing crisis is to remember the old ways of caring for Country and treat one another like the kin we are. The survival of all living things depends on it. It's never too late while we still live and remain.

So, ask yourself, Warami. (Good to meet you, where are you from? How are you in relation?)

— Coby Edgar, 2026