

Ganma

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'Ganma' is a mixed-media self-portrait that reflects my experience of cultural integration. The word Ganma comes from the Yolngu people in North-East Arnhem Land and translates to the meeting and mixing of saltwater and freshwater. In becoming one, the two waters mix together in a lagoon where the interface of currents meet and a foam is created in the process. The Yolngu people use this as a metaphor for the meeting of two cultures. The streams combined can lead to deeper understanding and truth and the foam is a representation of new knowledge.

This word accurately describes my experience of living in a remote Aboriginal community on Elcho Island. Living there for 8 years, I became accustomed to their traditional ways of living. I adopted their approach to relationships, ceremony, language, and reverence for land. In the same way, they adopted some of our language, religious beliefs, food, rituals, and education. My artwork represents my experience of cultural integration and the beauty of these two cultures both individually and together.

I took the most inspiration from the artist Frida Kahlo, as her use of symbolic cultural items, flora and fauna and her dreamy-strange sense of composition was very similar to my concept ideas. These design elements were taken into consideration when outlining the symbolic concepts I would use to represent each culture. For the representation of Aboriginal culture, I wanted to symbolise ceremonies and the sacredness of the land and animals. This was depicted through body paint, traditional art styles in the leaves and goanna and the choice of painting on a wooden bowl.

In an effort to represent my own Dutch heritage and Western upbringing, I included design elements that portrayed traditional customs and modern culture. These aspects were depicted through traditional Dutch attire, the inclusion of flowers which is culturally significant for both and the realistic art style. Additionally, I used a red ribbon around the hands as a metaphor for the customs and constraints of etiquette in the Western culture.

My other primary focus was choosing which application of style and techniques I would use to depict myself and my Aboriginal friend. To do so I connected with a range of practitioners such as Egon Schiele, Gustav Klimt, Sandro Botticelli, Milt Kobayashi, and Leah Fraser to explore realism, expressionism, and naïve styles. Once choosing a more realistic style I explored human figure painting techniques which emphasized the shapes and proportions of body anatomy, shading and colour. Lastly, I took inspiration for decorative shapes and designs from the artist Gustav Klimt.

The process of creating a symbolic depiction of each culture highlighted the importance of connecting with other practitioners and the process of learning, observing, and practicing the diverse forms of creativity. Trialling techniques and styles expanded my skills as an artist and strengthened the depiction of the connection of culture. This concept of adopting a different culture is something that cannot be easily described. Deeply exploring how to represent these ideas through images, and taking others' work as an example, assisted me in reflecting on my experience and the unique identity I possess with a blending of multiple cultures.