

All photos: Anthony Warry



Art that tells a story

The Coomaditchie artists have been using their paintings to connect people with Aboriginal culture for three decades. Iris Huizinga reports



The creativity of Aboriginal people is on display as the nation celebrates NAIDOC Week from 3 to 10 July. Every year in the first week of July, Australians focus on the heritage and culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

This year the theme of the week is “Get up, stand up, show up!” *The Flame* visited Aunties Narelle Thomas and Lorraine Brown, two well-known elders, in their studio gallery at Kemblawarra Community Hall to ask them what NAIDOC means to them, and what it can mean to others.

The sisters form the beating heart of the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation, a non-profit organisation “dedicated to raising the esteem, pride and dignity of young Aboriginal people in their Aboriginal culture and heritage”.

Lorraine and Narelle are artists first and foremost, and their colourful works are on display at Wollongong, Port Kembla, Mt Keira, Shellharbour and other places, including Scarborough Public school.

“Oh, that’s deadly, Auntie!” was the comment a youngster once made upon seeing a particularly bright mural the ladies had created.

The sisters are full of life and humour, and keen for their mob’s story to be seen and heard.

When our conversation hits topics they care deeply about, Lorraine and Narelle tumble over each other’s sentences, showing their mutual

passion for their culture, and a profound desire for change. As Narelle says, they bounce off each other. There is also a lot of laughter. Next year they celebrate their 30th year as a corporation.

“Since we opened in 1993 to the wider community, people have been able to connect with us as Aboriginal people through our art,” says Lorraine.

“It helps them to understand because we do art workshops. It gives them an opportunity to come in, get connected with the Aboriginal art, understand it is not just a painting, but it’s a story.”

So what can we do in the Illawarra during NAIDOC this year?

Lorraine: Attending NAIDOC [activities] is a good way of learning what Acknowledgement of Country is and what Welcome to Country is; they are two separate things. Participating helps to get a little bit more understanding of Aboriginal culture.

Narelle: NAIDOC Day and our artwork: both are a bridge to the wider community.

Lorraine: Look at the Aboriginal Mission here. It used to be a no-go area for a lot of people. A lot of people are either afraid of it, or they have their own opinion about it.

Narelle: They think we’re all the same, if one’s bad, we’re all bad. We all got drugs, alcohol, abuse.

Lorraine: They don’t think they have the good

“The youth of today, they are our footprint of tomorrow.”

– Aunty Lorraine Brown



“We are richer people learning about each other's cultures and having respect for each other's cultures.”

– Aunty Narelle Thomas

and the bad in their own communities. It makes it very hard. How can you break down the myths and all those barriers, if people believe what they hear all the time? It's not right. There is good and bad in every culture, no matter what culture you come from.

What's hard for the Aboriginal people: we're still on the lowest [rung] of the ladder in this country. We are at the bottom of the pyramid, on the flat ground.

Narelle: We never moved. Oh, hang on, we've just moved up a tiny bit.

Lorraine: Yeah, we are not counted with the flora and fauna no more.

A lot of our art is really important because it's keeping us connected to the culture and that's what we want our kids to do.

Narelle also sees it as her responsibility as an elder to try to keep the kids connected to their culture.

Narelle: They should be proud to be Aboriginal and they should know their background, where they come from and what happened. How our elders fought for our rights to be in schools, pools, to go into a town, shopping, everything.

Lorraine: The youth of today, they are our footprint of tomorrow.

So we need to keep our culture and they need to be instilled with their culture because we don't want to lose our culture. If the kids don't carry it on, we lose our culture. And they have to be proud of who they are, proud that they have ancestral ties to a 40,000-year-old culture. That is something nobody can take away from them.

The Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation runs several programs for high school children.

Lorraine: There are a lot of kids that come here and have no idea. They don't even know what a midden is and they're in high school. There is a certain percentage of blame for the non-Koori society, but there is also blame on themselves. You know, you don't just sit there and blame them all your life. Get up off your ass and do something about it.

Narelle: If you want things, no one is going to give it to you on a silver platter.

Lorraine: Get up and earn it. And it is really important for them to know that, and how their culture can take them a long way. If they learn everything about their culture, they can tell people about it and be proud of that.

We design our own NAIDOC painting. That's it on the wall, that big one there [see page 16 and the *Flame's* cover]. The clothing should be here soon. Get up, stand up, show up! If you want things to be done, you got to get up, stand up for your rights and be there when they are fighting for them.

How can locals in the Illawarra help?

Lorraine: Try to accept Aboriginal people for what they are and who they are. Don't discriminate against them all the time.

This country now is a melting pot of cultures, but they can never deny us that we are the First Nations people in this land. That's what people have to accept. If you want reconciliation, then know the history. The black history was written by white man himself. Our black history is on the land itself.

Narelle: Rocks, trees...

Lorraine: All our cave art, all our birthing trees, all our rocks where we sharpened our tools. So we never wrote it, but it is on everything that is on this land.

Narelle: Our culture is connected to the land and it is an environmental culture. That's why they had totems and things like that, so you didn't eat everything. You looked after it so you could come back next season to that place and get food.

Lorraine: Thurrawal's (Dharawal's) totem is the humpback whale. Our totem, for Yuin nation, is a black duck.

Narelle: We are richer people learning about each other's cultures and having respect for each other's cultures.

Lorraine: There is some beautiful tucker in those other cultures too.

They both laugh heartily and start reminiscing about all the wonderful exotic dishes they have eaten in the area. ✨



What's on in NAIDOC Week

NAIDOC Week celebrations will be held from 3-10 July.

(NAIDOC stands for "National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee".)

Below are some of the local events confirmed at press time – see our online Calendar for the latest activities.

Last Minute Gallery Exhibition

2-10 July, 10am-3pm, free, Coomaditchie Hall, corner Shellharbour Road and Parkes Street, Kemblawarra. All artwork and products will be available for sale.

Visit www.coomaditchie.org.au

Free Family Fun day

Tuesday July 5, 10am-1 pm, free, Green Street, Warrawong. Local artists and dancers, giveaways, activities for young and old, free BBQ.

Learn to weave workshops

Friday July 8, 1-3 pm, Saturday July 9, 10am-noon, The Waterfront, Shell Cove. Free but registration required, gumaraa.com.au

Local Government Regional NAIDOC Awards Dinner 2022

Saturday July 30, 5.30-10.30pm, \$75, The Fraternity Club, Fairy Meadow.

For more details:

www.naidoc.org.au

wollongong.nsw.gov.au

www.theillawarraflame.com.au