

Penny Evans: *Dhigaraa galgaa baa – Place of many birds*

Penny Evans's ceramic sculptures emerge from her reflections on her own Country and its links to neighbouring places. Evans is a Gamilaraay/Gomeri artist from north-eastern New South Wales who lives on Bundjalung Country in northern New South Wales. She regularly visits contrasting ecologies of different landscapes. It is here that she bears witness to and senses the spiritual signs of ancestral experiences.

I listen, observe, interact and decolonise these various neighbouring ecosystems, thinking of our ancestors and feeling the metaphysical traces of their existence through the relationship of animals, birds, plants, sky ... totemic relationships and interdependencies. The Country becomes humanised. The Country speaks to me. And although I can't understand it the way our ancestors did, I get an inkling by listening, by observing, by feeling.

For Evans, experience of Country invokes a deep environmental awareness. Her endearing forms of *dhigaraa* – meaning 'birds' in Gomeri language – respond to the desecration and exploitation of the land and waters through historical and recent activities of mining, land clearing and cotton farming. Evans is imagining the deterioration of places where *dhigaraa* and other animals dwell and flourish. The sacred waterholes of her family history are drying up. The river networks, once full of fish and mussel shells, no longer flow. With these waters suffering, so too are the animals, trees and plants supported by this life force.

Evans sees *dhigaraa* as a carrier of knowledge and a connector to place. Since deep time, birds have lived alongside Aboriginal people, with many First Nations cultures enjoying complex and layered relationships with birds in connection with the environment. These understandings are maintained in our stories, songlines, art, dance and ceremony. Evans's clay *dhigaraa* embody a powerful message – '*Spirit of Country is stronger than the devastation*'.

This vitality is celebrated through large gatherings of *dhigaraa* belonging to different species. Each bird represented in this exhibition is attached to the forests, heaths, wetlands, rivers and significant waterholes of Evans's Country. Some of the *dhigaraa* featured include spoonbills, which appreciate shallow waters and wetlands; galahs, which fly in large flocks close to water; and yellow-tailed black cockatoos, which feast on the banksia plant. Evans's skilful coil building and use of vibrantly coloured slips highlight the unique spirit of each animal.

The *dhigaraa* are perched joyfully on ceramic tree stumps and branches. Their presence on strong and sturdy trees laments the overclearing of trees and the loss of cultural heritage sites on Country. On the exteriors of her clay trees, Evans heavily incises lines, which reference ancestral practices of carving and marking trees and cultural objects. Scratching and engraving away the coloured slips, the artist reveals material underneath. Evans's physical process of carving is a '*wonderful metaphor for decolonising and connecting with my cultural roots*'.

Each bird and tree carefully formed by Evans's hands holds meaning of her spiritual, cultural and physical closeness to Country. Collectively, the abundant colourful flock speaks about the importance of the environment and the urgency of its preservation.

Freja Carmichael

Penny Evans, Gamilaraay people, New South Wales
born 1966, Sydney
Bunduun (sacred kingfisher), 2018, Lismore,
New South Wales
earthenware ceramics, underglaze, glaze,
36.0 x 16.0 x 25.0 cm
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