

# PENNY EVANS IN BLACK AND WHITE

by Claire G. Coleman

Words scream out from the white walls, a quiet fury, a poem, a story disjointed – scattered and displaced like our people.

Most (if not all) art is about storytelling when you dive into it; the layers of meaning peel back as you dive deeper, then enfold you like a hug as you pass. If you are not ready for it, if you deny the truth, art can smother. This is true of all forms of art, from the obvious storytelling of literature, to hard and impenetrable forms of ceramic. Ceramics by Indigenous artists, a small genre for now but growing like bull kelp, is the making of art from the land itself – clay and glazes, minerals and dirt, story and thought made hard by fire.

Regardless of its hardness you can penetrate below the surface to see the story within, carve into the surface to probe the meaning beneath.

Ceramics are a form of metamorphic rock. Clay, silica, and minerals are transformed by heat to create something new and permanent – perhaps the most permanent of items – they cannot corrode or age, only break. Penny Evans has taken this material and transformed it into wall pieces telling the story of the colony; working with permanence, so eternal it belongs in what Stanner named *the everywhen*<sup>1</sup>.

The artist has unpacked and interrogated the story of the colony (that brought us ceramics through trade) with this eternal material, exposing our peri-colonial nation, displaying and interrogating the moment in which the colony dominates – perhaps in the hope that this baby nation called Australia might one day become post-colonial. These stories echo in the zeitgeist, in this time when the colonial oppression of our people has started to become unacceptable (although the 2023 Federal Voice Referendum result tells us we have a long way to go).

This body of work tells a dramatic story, the arrival of the colonisers, the oppression of our people, and the future decolonisation that already exists in the eternal now. The story is there in black and white, blurring the line between poetry and stone, between sculpture and text, between artefact and art, between art and artifice. This follows and expands upon a long modernist tradition of Indigenous text-based protest works, which includes the startling designs of Vernon Ah Kee and the banner-paintings of Richard Bell. The Evans sculptures weaponise the shapes of Aboriginalia and kitsch in a way that seems to pay tribute to the installations of Tony Albert.

This is art as activism, art as politics.

**Penny Evans**, *In Black and White* (detail), 2023, porcellaneous stoneware, underglazes carving, sgraffito, dimensions variable; photo: Michelle Eabrey





Above & opposite: **Penny Evans**, *In Black and White* (details), 2023, porcellaneous stoneware underglazes, carving, sgraffito, dimensions variable; photos: Michelle Eabrey

Indigenous people often use art to fight for equality because it's the most powerful tool we have in a colony where we went from owning all the land to living as an oppressed minority.

Evans' current style, including this body of work, is relatively new but it resonates successfully with other decolonial art, acknowledging the world we live in where the colony has come and refuses to leave, the eye-blink of time in the eternal now in which the Non-Indigenous people are here. One day they were not here, one day they will not be here, that is the way of things in the eternal now, but Evans' anthropogenic metamorphic rock will be here long after our species is extinct. If a new civilisation arises, perhaps another species more tolerant of the heat and bad weather our human species has created, they will wonder at this civilisation; and these works of ceramic will still exist, will tell the story of this colony.



We exist in the same world, Penny and I, using beauty to tell the truth, and truth to feed beauty, and hoping the truth will carry because truth can change the world. Truth is perhaps the only thing that could decolonise this continent. One artist cannot change the world by simply attempting to make changes ourselves; an artist changes the world by changing the people, by showing the people the shape of the world so they are impelled to make the changes. This is the power of story, and thus the power of art – to change the world indirectly, to create a world where decolonisation, perhaps, becomes inevitable.

Great Indigenous art, perhaps, works to make decolonisation inevitable.

This is nothing new. Beauty in art often exists only to carry the story, to sneak the lesson into the minds of the audience, to teach an audience that has not asked to be taught. Evans demonstrates this – the works are at first beautiful and immediately symbolic, boomerangs and classical Indigenous shapes join geometric shapes on a wall, in stark black and white. The messages are sgraffitoed into the surface, in relief – an extractive process.

This is a way of scratching in, digging in below the surface to find the story hidden deep below. This is not the story on the surface of the colony; this is the deep story in deep time that is often hidden.

Penny's work teaches us to take the heat – that by taking the heat of the furnace, the kiln, the forge, we can come back harder and stronger, with more story and more power. The words scratched into the surface are not the only layer of story – they are simply the surface. We dive into the surface, peeling back layers like the artist has, scratching into meaning, into layers of knowledge, and then we realise, decolonisation is as hard as metamorphic rock but so is our culture. Our culture is eternal and cannot be taken from us.

Fire and earth, in the artist's hands, have taught us the real story lives just below the surface waiting for us to dig in.

1 W.E.H. Stanner, *The Dreaming*, 1953

**Penny Evans is an artist based in Lismore, New South Wales. A descendant of the K/Gamilaroi people, her work connects with family, community, and national histories of colonisation's aftermath. She is the recipient of numerous awards and residencies and exhibits her work nationally.**

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