

Urban Rite

24 October 2024
114 Commonwealth Street, Sydney

Our revenge will be the laughter of our children — Bobby Sands MP

Artist Reko Rennie sits at a prominent table in a French restaurant in Melbourne's fashionable South Yarra, a world away from his childhood in the city's Western Suburbs. Waiters greet him by name and patrons nod and shake hands with him as they pass, he talks energetically, gesticulating with a healthy glass of Pinot Noir. It's almost a year ago to the day that we had dinner in Sydney, talking about the looming referendum and the Voice to Parliament.

He talks emotively about the surrealness of seeing his survey exhibition *REKOSPECTIVE*, which has just opened at the National Gallery of Victoria. Filled with works that reference consistent iconography in his practice developed originally on the streets of his childhood Footscray. A crown symbolising Aboriginal sovereignty and power, a diamond symbol from his Kamilaroi ancestry, and the outline of the Aboriginal flag. Prominently included in the survey exhibition is the work *YESMOTHERFUCKERSYES* (2023), a work created in the run-up to the failed referendum. A work that perhaps foretold its outcome, a cry of frustration for a nation that has consistently shown disregard for Aboriginal people. Consistently let down.

Reko describes his latest body of work *Urban Rite* in reference to a continuation of the ideas in the survey exhibition but also a new chapter. A key development is the use of figuration in a more prominent way than previously and the use of himself as a stand-in, in the paintings, a faceless form. The drive for this body of work is also consistent with his practice, it's about Aboriginal people and society's attempts to hold them back, erase them, imprison them, and destroy them. It situates Aboriginal culture in his story, removed from Country, growing up in the inner city. The inner city being where the largest number of Aboriginal people live. It's also about Reko himself, an iconoclast, not happy to conform with white Australia's view of how he should be but also sections of black Australia that prescribe Aboriginal authenticity to living remotely on Country and are suspicious of advancement, education, and wealth.

EXHIBITION TEXT

The figure of Reko stands proudly in front of his Porsche in the work *Black Nouveau* (2024), but it's not a work of self-portraiture. The face is left undefined. It's an invitation to First Nations and marginalised people to see themselves in the painting. To imagine a world where they can progress, they can get educated, they can have nice things and break a cycle of poverty in both monetary and psychic terms. The artist acts as a vanguard for this change, he acts with bravery and without compromise. The blank face is a placeholder that invites alternative lives. The background is filled with the repeated diamond pattern and the ultramarine blue so present throughout his twenty-year career.

A studio in North Melbourne, Reko's daughter slowly fills in sections of the paintings with a fine brush alongside her father. She listens to music, laughs and dances around. Reko watches her, hugs her. This is survival in celebration. They discuss colour choice for the next sections. The works pop with colour, unifying as they come into focus. Reko's urban rites and rights occupy the same field. Ultimately finding expression and realisation in the drive for these works and above all in the laughter of his daughter. In the present and future his pasts and the pasts of his people redefined.

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