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Kaylene Whiskey Brings the Indulkana Community Spirit to Tarnanthi 2021

By Emma-Kate Wilson Adelaide, October 6, 2021



Kaylene Whiskey in the studio at Indulkana, South Australia. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Meg Hansen.

Bringing the life and energy of Iwantja Arts to Tarnanthi 2021, the Art Gallery of South Australia's Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art (15 October 2021–30 January 2022), Iwantja Arts artist Kaylene Whiskey has set out to bring her community closer to the rest of Australia with *Seven Sistas Sign* (2021).

To make the work, Whiskey transformed the old highway sign for the art centre into a bright and colourful painting. The official sign's original writing and colour palette—bold white text over a brown background—peeks out from behind Whiskey's lively mark-making, depicting a lush gathering of wildflowers from the surrounding desert and depictions of seven female pop culture icons, including Catwoman.

A kaleidoscope of hues adorn the surface of the sign, inspired by familiar iconography. 'I love to use lots of bright colours in my work,' Whiskey explains. 'This is influenced by the colours of my Country here on the APY Lands like

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the desert wildflowers, as well as the lovely colours of the amazing outfits worn by my favourite pop stars, Dolly Parton and Tina Turner.'

Vivid green vines adorn the sign linking the women together, and Whiskey's everyday imprints—lizards, butterflies, and boomerangs are joined by lollies, spirit bottles, and Coca Cola.

Working on road signs honours an entirely different method to the usual painting on canvas. Whiskey uses water-based enamel paint that is 'sticky, like honey,' resulting in a longer process, with each mark and dot imprinting the old sign with new life.

'When I paint on the signs, I think, hey, I'm painting on a piece of Indulkana here—I better make sure this is a good strong painting!' Whiskey excitedly ruminates. 'I feel like I'm bringing a piece of my home into the gallery to share with people and for them to see. My work is about family, fun, happy times—I want people to see a strong story coming from my community!'

At the heart of the artwork is the Kungkarangkalpa Tjukurpa, known as the Seven Sisters story, centred on family looking out for each other. 'It's an important story for Anangu and many Aboriginal people right across Australia,' Whiskey shares. 'It's all about sisters looking out for each other, so I've painted the sisters as some of my favourite strong women, like Wonder Woman and Dolly Parton.'

The painting captures the Anangu way, musing on her community and how they protect one another. The artist adds, 'Our art centre is full of strong women—we say kungka kunpu—and we've all got each other's back, we support each other, and we love to have fun together too.'

Within the composition, the viewer can spot famous women like Whoopi Goldberg in character as her role of the nun from the film Sister Act (1992), a speech bubble reading, 'We are the seven sistas having a party.' Whiskey joins them, pointing out that 'Anangu Kungka is growing the mingkulpa (bush tobacco), she's going to sell it with her kangaroo friend.'

In the middle of the sign, Cher is bringing tjala (honey ants) to the party, 'but they keep crawling away while she gets her hair and clothes looking nice,' Whiskey continues. 'Hey! Come back here, tasty tjala! That's Tina Turner wearing big yellow wings like a pinta-pinta (butterfly).'

Elsewhere, Wonder Woman admires Dolly Parton dancing under a disco ball, while Whiskey reminds Catwoman, 'Careful not to step on the maku (witchetty grub), Cat-lady!'

With some art centres closed to the public across Australia, and domestic borders mostly closed, never has there been a more essential time to continue to connect these communities with audiences around the country. Whiskey has co-opted the 'closed' section of the sign, removing the final letter.

'We don't open for tourists anymore, but for Anangu, we're never closed—this is a place for family and friends, painting and having a good time together,' Whiskey concludes. 'We're not closed, we're close.' —[O]