FLINDERS UNIVERSITY
MUSEUM OF ART

Articulate: Talking art and ideas

Episode 4: Red Flags and other warning signs with Kait James and Aaron Bradbrook
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What happens when everyday objects become tools to challenge stereotypes and reclaim identity?

Since 2018, Wadawurrung artist Kait James has developed a distinct visual language through the reappropriation of racialised products, transforming familiar objects such as tea towels and souvenirs into sharp, thought-provoking works. This practice culminates in her most ambitious solo exhibition to date, Kait James: Red Flags

In this episode, James joins exhibition curator Aaron Bradbrook to discuss the ideas behind Red Flags. They explore the shifting political power of images and the strength of art in challenging narratives surrounding First Nations culture and representation.

A message for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders: This episode refers to themes of historical and ongoing discrimination faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and may prompt strong emotional responses. It includes social and political critique from the artist's perspective, and includes strong language. Listener discretion is advised.

FUMA: Welcome to the podcast *Articulate: talking art and ideas with FUMA*. Flinders University Museum of Art acknowledges the Kaurna people as the traditional custodians of the land on which we stand, work and share knowledge. We pay our respects to Kaurna elders past and present and extend this respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples listening in from all nations of Australia.

Kait James: I'd like to acknowledge the Kaurna people and pay my respects to their elders past and present and to their knowledge holders and to the younger mob that are coming through to strengthen community and culture.

I'm a Wadawurrung woman. Wadawurrung is in the Kulin Nation of Victoria, so it includes the areas of Geelong and Ballarat, the Bellarine Peninsula, and then also parts of the Great Ocean Road. I actually live in Melbourne on Wurundjeri country. And so, yeah, it's lovely to be here. I haven't...I've been to Adelaide a few times, but not for a really long time. So, it's been really wonderful to walk around. Yesterday I got to go to AGSA and to Jam Factory and it's a really lovely place to be.

Aaron Bradbrook: Yeah, I'd also like to acknowledge the Kaurna people of whose land this exhibition is being presented on and pay respects to elders of the past and present. And also, acknowledge the Peek Whurrong people of the Gunditjmara Eastern Maar Nation, which is the lands upon which I live and work.

So, on the 20th of May this year, Senator Pauline Hanson posted to her Instagram account criticism of the federal funding allocated to develop, present and tour this show. Senator Hanson described the funding as 'outrageous', the art as 'woke anti-Australian' and the exhibition as a 'waste of taxpayer money'. Eight days later, during an official Senate Estimates hearing, One Nation Senator Malcolm Roberts labelled Kait's work as 'kindergarten art' and stated that 'Creative Australia funding is aimed to promote radical causes'.

So, Kait was offered the opportunity to submit a reply in response to the comments made by Roberts, where she acknowledged her use of political satire and parody as a strategy in her artwork, and also highlighted Senator Hanson's own use of these same strategies on her social media platform. And what Kait keenly observed, which I thought was just as powerful and as direct as her practice, was, to quote Kait, 'the issue raised during Senate Estimates does not appear to be the use of satire itself, but rather the use of satire by a First Nations artist to comment on a public political figure'.

So, this example highlights a hypocrisy of standards clearly along racial lines. So, my first question to Kait is why is it important in your practice to hold political figures to account?

Kait: I think it's important and to give a little bit of context to the political portraits that I included, I made this body of work in 2024. It was just after the Referendum, and it was coming up to the federal election and the time where Jacinta Price and Peter Dutton were using Indigenous people as… as pawns basically and trying to get votes by using us.

And so, I'd previously made the Pauline Hanson portrait or work. So, I decided to make one about Peter Dutton and one about Jacinta Price. And, you know, leading up to the tour, NETS also, we had a meeting – and NETS is the organisation that actually tours and receives funding from the government and then tours the show on my behalf. We had a discussion about possible issues that could be raised during the tour, and Peter Dutton was one of them that may cause issues and perhaps Jacinta Price. And what I find interesting is that Pauline Hanson wasn't even on the radar two years ago when the tour started and how quickly things change. And that's not something I imagined would happen.

And I also think it's really interesting that when I got the chance to reply to the Senate after these comments were made by Malcolm Roberts and also Minister Nita Green, who is a Labor minister, who actually took it upon herself to actually comment on the work rather than comment negatively about the work, rather than actually discussing the funding, which was the topic of the Senate Estimates.

It was... I find it interesting that they were talking specifically about the Vision Australia's grant that was given to NETS to tour and I was the only recipient, the only First Nations recipient, of that Vision Australia grant. All the other recipients were non-Indigenous Australians but none of their work got brought up. And it's similar to the actual Senate estimates, that I watched the whole entire thing, every artist that was discussed were either immigrants or first-generation immigrants, second-generation immigrants. They were, you know, anything political. But, I mean, if you want to make, if you're a non-Indigenous person to make nice fluffy work, then that's fine. But if you want to make political works, then, you know, perhaps this will be an issue for you.

But... It's not certainly going to stop me making political works and it has just added fuel to the fire. And I think it's really important. Like what else, I mean, for me, what else am I going to say? Like it's, I think these people need to be held to account and that was another argument of mine in my response to parliament was that: political figures are paid a considerable amount of money to represent communities, and they should be um hold to account. There's such a long tradition of political satire and it's okay for a non-indigenous person to do it but, yeah exactly, when a First Nations person does it, it's a problem. And I'm happy to be that problem and I will continue to be that problem.

Yeah, I don't know whether I answered your question, but I never know whether I answer your questions or not [laughing].

Aaron: I think... so we had a beautiful coffee before we came and the ideas of archiving and erasure from the archive came up through the discussion. And it feels like... no, it doesn't feel like, I think that's exactly what that narrative of Pauline, Senator Hanson, is trying to achieve is a particular story to be narrated. And your story threatens that story.

Kait: Yeah.

Aaron: Why is it important to have to work in that role? Like, I mean, you've sort of discussed it, but that, you know, what's, I guess, the drive?

Kait: I don't know whether I can really answer that. I don't know why I do it. It just happens. And I suppose, I mean, everyone kind of sits around and talks to friends or family about politics. And for me, that just comes out in work. And one of the big things that I've been working on, you know, that's kind of led from the work that I've made in the past about Captain Cook but also the work in the show, is about these explorers. I recently did another work that's not part of this show, and it was about Australian

explorers, and it had Matthew Flinders in it which is quite appropriate to this... But I started looking up the actual... what these people did. And you know it wasn't all that great. They came to this country, and they either died here or left. They weren't here to build a country. They weren't here to, you know, they were here for their own ego and their own fame. And I figure, I kind of think that's the same for politicians as well. They're here for their own fame or their own agenda. They're not always, you know, about the community. And I can see a lot of the parallels between the explorers and politicians as well. But, yeah, I don't know why I do it.

Aaron: So, I mean, you mentioned Cook and I know you've done a lot of thinking around that as a figurehead and what that represents. And I guess I'm curious to hear it again.

Kait: Yeah. Well, I find it really interesting and I think if Cook suddenly was resurrected, I think he would find it quite funny about how he's been considered a hero for this country. He also only came here for a very short time and yet there are monuments to him. There's, you know, universities named after him. There's souvenirs of him. I've got a massive collection of Cook souvenirs. And then these tea towels that he's on. One, in particular, is this tea towel from Surfer's Paradise and it's you know Cook... um Captain Cook and it's like he's got nothing to do with these things... um and so yeah I do find it fascinating how we create these national heroes and how we've kind of adopted these things to have a hero because we didn't have one. And it could have been Flinders instead of Cook. It could have been some other random explorer that would have been chosen.

It may, you know, I don't know. I mean, we have Captain Cook's cottage in Melbourne right in the middle of the city and he never lived in this cottage. It was his parents' cottage, and it was brought over in the 40s brick by brick and rebuilt in one of our, in Fitzroy Gardens. And I think if, you know... If he was resurrected and he saw this cottage sitting that was in the UK and was brought over brick by brick, I'm sure he would find that quite funny. And so, I just like the idea of this fantasy of what's been created.

Aaron: And as a strategy for your work, like thinking on funny, obviously you use humour and colour.

Kait: Yep.

Aaron: But the language you use. Your commentary is really direct, very explicit. And I guess I'm curious to find out more about the strategies you deploy in your work and why.

Kait: I think when I first started making the tea towel works, they were a little bit more subtle. And it wasn't until after the Referendum they've become more direct. And I think I've needed to become more direct in the work, especially in the text. I think it's really important to use humour because humour and colour make it easy to look at the work. You know, you can reel people in and then kind of smack them in the face when

they're... when you have their attention. And I think that's a really important device and that wasn't kind of initially intentional it was just something that I, you know, colours I like to use and things like that. And it has definitely become almost like a weapon. But, yeah, I mean, mob are funny people and we want to have a laugh and we've got to have a laugh. So, you know, a lot of the works I make for other mob. I don't make them for non-Indigenous people. And so, yeah, you need to laugh otherwise you'll be crying all the time.

Aaron: And you spoke about what you collect.

Kait: Yeah.

Aaron: Tony Albert sort of coined a lot of the work you collect as 'Aboriginalia' and your work sort of sits in conversation with Tony's, with Karla Dickens, with a number of other artists who are working with Aboriginalia. And I'm curious as to in terms of the archive and collecting and saving or salvaging and then reappropriating the reappropriated, I'm curious as to the strategy and the interest in that.

Kait: Well, I think when you grow up surrounded by these objects but, you know, for me they didn't really represent my community with truth and respect. And so, it was about reclaiming them and then giving them a new life. But it's also about looking at the objects themselves and what they represent. So, the tea towels that I use, they've got a lot of stolen imagery on them. So, they've got a lot of the burial posts from the Tiwi Islands. They've got a number of different shields from different areas, and they're not acknowledged of where they came from. And so, like Australia and like Australia's history, it's kind of mashed all our culture together in, you know, in inappropriate ways. There's even sacred items on the tea towels themselves that I won't specifically talk about because I don't have the permissions to. But there are men's business on the tea towels that shouldn't be there. And it's very stereotypical of Aboriginal people.

I think Australia is very stereotypical of Aboriginal people. I often have in my life said things to, you know, someone might say, oh, you're Aboriginal. It's like, yes. And they'll say, I've been to Central Australia, as if there's only Aboriginal people belong in Central Australia. There is no Aboriginal people in Victoria or in Melbourne. It's interesting how that's when you look at, say, Australiana tea towels, they'll have a map of Australia, and the Aboriginal symbols are in the centre. And then on the outside, there'll be like a surfer in Queensland and, you know, a gold miner in Victoria or something like it's not. And that kind of is something that I am very interested in souvenirs is how we see ourselves in this country and anywhere in the world. Like any kind of souvenir, I think is really interesting about how people view themselves. And say the Brownie Downing works that I recreated.

So, Brownie Downing was a ceramicist and illustrator in the, I think, 50s. Her first name wasn't Brownie and I wonder why she was called Brownie. It's very strange but she was

a non-Indigenous woman and she created... most of her work was of Aboriginal babies and children. And she created the ceramic works but also lots of plates and she did books and all sorts of things, but it was often, you know, Indigenous kids chasing butterflies and things like that, but it was at a time where our babies and children were being stolen. And so, there's no reference to that at all. And so, I took a... It's actually quite a very small figurine and then I recreated that. Instead of a skip, I gave it a march to give it a more powerful stance. And also, the original had a little hole in its hand to put flowers, but I've changed that and added a flag. And each of the acronyms have been changed. So, VIP was Violent Invasion Pain.

And that was kind of, I wanted to, and I would like to recreate more of these ceramic works of hers in the future. Often, it'll just be a head floating on a wall and it's that kind of idea of, you know, collecting. And you know even kind of the idea of collecting animals and how you put a head on the wall or how these things will be objects that you don't really think about and you don't think about the history that's connected to them or what was actually happening for Indigenous people at that time.

And same goes with the tea towels. When I first started making them, I was basing them... They're all calendars and they range from about 1965 through to 1985. And so, I was basing the works of the tea towels on what was actually happening for Indigenous people at that time and including a lot of popular cultural references. And then, you know, I was born in the late ‘70s, so then it was kind of also including, you know, childhood references of mine as well. And so that's how it kind of all started and the interest in these objects.

But the collection has grown and, you know, I've spoken to other artists about it, like Tony Albert. You know, he's got an enormous collection. And you almost want to save these objects and give them a new life. But also, it's amazing how many are still out there. And I always think that perhaps I'm going to run out one day, but I just received a package in the mail from someone that was ten brand new details that had never been used that, you know, are 50 years old. And it's amazing that... You know, who was buying these objects? Why weren't they using them? Were they embarrassed to use them? Did they buy them themselves? Were they gifted? Have they just been stuck in a drawer or a cupboard all these years waiting to become artworks? But, yeah, I do find it funny, though, that I create art from tea towels. And if you had have said to me 10 years ago, that's going to be your life, I would not have believed you, but it's fun.

Aaron: And this show is quite, like, an expansive kind of experiment's not the right word, but you kind of adopted a number of mediums that were kind of different. But I wonder about kind of thinking about the archive and the story, you know, like there's the imperialist agenda. It was so important to create a particular psyche, you know, in this new Australian land that was very supportive of one story. And I think Brownie Downing's envisioning of the story was in stark contrast to the reality. But the archive

was trying to keep the reality erased. And I think that's this rise of right-wing populist thinking is, again, like a story re-emerging to kind of articulate a particular psyche, re-enliven a particular psyche and keep the narrative or keep that another story erased.

And is there a, in the salvaging of the collecting, is there a need to not let any erasure? Even though they sit within kind of a strange appropriated, often made by white people, they still exist as. Well, they are kind of, maybe they're not cultural objects, but they are something different now in their new life.

Kait: Yeah, and it's almost like trying to make them into cultural objects and give the cultural importance that they deserve. And, yeah, I think there's, you know, interesting parallels there.

Aaron: One question I always ask you, and it's very heavy, but I think it sets a lot of the context for the show is what does colonial violence... mean to you?

Kait: Yeah, I mean that's a massive question and I was thinking about it yesterday walking down I think one of the main streets in Adelaide and it was lined with London plane trees that we also have in Melbourne and how majority of even non-Indigenous people are allergic to them. So, I find that colonial violence is just having that, you know, walking along the street seeing these beautiful sandstone buildings of all this, you know, beautiful country that's been created into these colonial-looking buildings and then you're lining the streets in these plain trees that cause a horrific hay fever. That's violent.

But, yeah, it was nice to kind of come out here today and actually breathe some fresh air. But, yeah, I mean, colonial violence happens on a daily basis.

You know, I look at it recently in, you know, the areas of, say, native title and having to prove continuous connection to culture and country but not having our word taken for it and having to prove these things in a white court and then having anthropologists use non-Indigenous colonial settlers' notes as proof and how do you know they've written down the right thing? But then our word is not taken as you know the truth or one hunder percent accuracy and that kind of thing. It’s really difficult especially when at the time then you know my grandmother's generation, her father's generation, were not allowed to practice language or practice culture. They weren't allowed to you know perform ceremony and so you know, them having to hide that and do that in secret. So then there's no proof of that. So then how are we then proving connection to country?

And things like that, it's still ongoing and it's still, I mean, there's the broader areas and horrific incarceration rates and the high levels of... instances of, you know, suicide and and the shorter life expectancy that's still all a thing and then you have opportunities like Treaty in Victoria which is um was signed last year which is going really well but then it's dangled in your face and threatened to be taken away. So, we've got an election coming up in Victoria at the end of November and originally Treaty had bipartisan

support but now the Liberals have said they will take it away and so will One Nation if either of them get in. So, you're constantly having these, and same with the voice federally, you're having these things dangled in front of your face and then ripped away. It's like, oh, you know, give it a go. No, actually, you can't have that. And, you know, it would be really amazing to see where Treaty could take us and the amazing initiatives that they're hoping to bring in and all this hard work that's gone in for ten years of bringing this to life. Yeah, I just, it feels like a constant rollercoaster and, yeah, it's exhausting and, yeah. Constantly, yeah, it's violence.

Aaron: Is that why your work's become more direct and more explicit?

Kait: I think so.

Aaron: Is the message not getting through?

Kait: But I think that's also very much part of my personality was almost passive-aggressive and then it's become more aggressive-aggressive because, you know, you need people to listen. And when people stop listening, that's a problem. I do want people to keep listening and often I need to get people's attention that's not going to come to a gallery space.

So, you've got to be quite... You've got someone's split second. So, yeah, it's about getting people's attention, I think.

Aaron: And how does that attention shift? Because you do a lot of work in public sculpture. So how do you navigate attention grabbing and commentary in the different spaces?

Kait: Yeah, I mean I suppose you've got to, making public art is a hell of a lot different and there's also the approval process and I've had quite a few works decline recently because they were too political or they were too... So, you do have to be a lot careful but I think it's really important and even just for younger generation to be able to see art that's accessible and it's about them and includes them I think is really important. I don't do a lot of stories. I don't share a lot of Wadawurrung stories and that's for various kind of reasons, but I suppose being... I do share them a little bit more in the public art space and that's more for community really. It's not for anyone else. But I think it is a really good opportunity working in public art.

I've started recently working for Wadawurrung Corporation and just one day a week just consulting on art and how to include art in spaces and in buildings. And how we can get as many voices in Wadawurrung Country as possible because I mean I've got a lot of artworks out there and there's other sort of family that also have a lot of works and it's it would be great to get you know other people, so that's kind of my aim as well. But yeah I think it's really important.

Aaron: Has that work shifted how you think about your practice?

Kait: A little bit it's really interesting being on the other side. But it's also a great way to advocate as well and come in to councils from the other side and ask them to include things in. like EOIs, for example, that make it easier for people to apply or encourage people to apply, but also what's appropriate, what's not appropriate to ask and to provide.

So, yeah, I think it's most of my family all work for this corporation and so it is like working for family and I see all the hard work that they do and I just kind of want to also contribute as well and so that's kind of my way to be able to contribute.

Aaron: I guess thinking about contribution and acknowledgement, so I'm drawing a bit of a bow here, is you went to great lengths for this show that's touring to seven different galleries to connect with leaders in those Countries that it's touring to, seek permission and then also make work in response. Why is that important?

Kait: I think I know when I certainly when I travel within this country, when I go to places, I want to find out about their Traditional Owners, you know, whose land I'm on and not everyone does that. And I think that's an interesting part of like the pennant souvenirs were traditionally made sort of in the ‘60s and ‘70s that were about place but, you know, didn't actually tell the true histories of those places or whose Country it was. So, I wanted to make a specific flag for every Country that was going to as a tribute, but also, you know, find out where it's going, you know, find out a little bit about these places because it's been to, you know. So it was: Warrnambool, Ararat, Wangaratta, Orange, Tamworth and Adelaide, and then it's going to Geelong, which is Wadawurrung Country, and then to Hobart. So, you know, it's such a massive area but also different communities and I think that's important to acknowledge. You know, when everyone, anyone is travelling in this country, they should know whose Country they're on.

Aaron: How does it feel to have the show on Wadawurrung Country?

Kait: Yeah, it's exciting because that wasn't originally part of the tour and I didn't make them a flag. So, I might have to make them a flag, quick sticks. But interesting that the Jabberung flag is jar and for Country or the same, the word for Country and ours is jar. So, it's very, very similar. So, I mean, there is technically the same word but it's not, you know, that one is very specifically about Ararat. So, yeah, it's exciting and it's going to be at the Wool Museum which is opposite to where Wadawurrung office will be moving to. So that's really exciting that, you know, it will be a very prominent place and, yeah, hopefully lots of mob will see it. So that's, yeah, exciting.

Aaron: And building on language and different ways of using language, you use the word blak, B-L-A-K, which is kind of another acknowledgement of another artist, Destiny Deacon. I'm interested in the rationale for using that type of language, that particular word and what that means in the context of this show.

Kait: Yeah, so I'm a massive fan of Destiny Deacon, or the late Destiny Deacon, and she did coin the term blak, B-L-A-K, and for her it was about taking the C-word or cunt out of being called a black cunt. And that's, you know, the word black is obviously about colour and, you know, for me it's about, you know, identity but also, you know, taking the colour out of the word as well.

Like, I acknowledge my pale skin privilege and that I identify as a black fella. And so, yeah, I think it's really, I think language is really important and we have our own, lots of mobs have their own certain words that we use, I'm sure. Ghana have their own words and there's more widely known words that are often slang and stuff that seems to grow for different mobs and I know Blak is very popular in Victoria. I'm sure it's a similar here and I think it's a great way of identifying and giving power to being able to identify as well. Yeah, it's a very powerful word and it's taking You know, being called black cunt or the blacks or, you know, derogatory terms, it's taking ownership as well.

Aaron: Can I ask you about pale skin privilege and taking ownership of that?

Kait: Yeah. It's something I think about all the time and often when I'm in a mob space or talking to other mob, you know, I feel that privilege. I move through institutions or spaces a lot easier than my cousins say. And I think it's really important to acknowledge and I recently made a work about that that's been acquired by Geelong Gallery. And, you know, there is a privilege and I think it's the same as white privilege. It's, you know, you've got to acknowledge these things and, yeah0...

Aaron: I've been doing a bit of reading around Gordon Bennett's practice of late and he talks about it's a different type of racism because it's a racism that exists when people don't know you're in the room. Yeah, so they talk differently.

Kait: A hundred percent, yeah. And that happens like all the time, yeah. I mean I was in a hospital once and I had this, I don't know, like I don't know what caused it but, yeah, I was sick and I was in this bed and I was just outside the nurse's station this room was just outside the nurse's station and I could hear The doctor talking to the nurse just saying, 'Oh, she's probably still drunk', which was why apparently I was sick. And then she walked in the room and went, 'Oh, no, you're not'. And I thought, that's right, the doctor said to the nurse, 'Oh, no, she's not'. And then I just thought, oh, my God, that's because you've seen the colour of my skin. Like you're just looking at a chart and how racist that was. And I was so horrified that. you know, if my skin was darker, would I have been treated differently? And I would have been. And how disgusting that is in, you know, and that was, I don't know, 2020 or something, yeah.

Aaron: Yeah, I mean, you spoke about higher rates of incarceration and that's another institutional failure. I mean, who would have known what the outcome would have been...

Kait: But I talked to, you know, my non-Indigenous friends and I remember having a discussion once about we were talking about funerals and a friend of mine, they'd never been to a funeral before and they were probably in their... you know, we were in our 20s or something and I thought, I've grown up going to funerals. How is this a thing for me and not you? Like how is that fair? And the same, and then we got on talking about prisons and it's like how do you not know people that have been to prison or in prison right now like it's how is how our lives so different when you know we we're also similar in ways too and it's just the unfortunate facts of being Indigenous in this country.

Aaron: Yeah, it's um a complete difference of how different bodies move through the world completely differently and how death is means different things to different people.

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