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Appropriated Circumstances

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Billboards bring Kreckler’s art to life

Derek Kreckler’s work is displayed on two billboards along the ...

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Driving out of Sydney and into the Illawarra, the Princes Highway is lined with billboards advertising telecommunications, fast food and radio stations. As travellers and commuters flash past in their cars, large, attention-grabbing signs suggest everything is for sale.

What if, just a couple of these billboards spoke to us about our past, about Australian history? What if they commemorated the traditional and spiritual custodians of the land, and the legacy of colonial artists whose paintings are the only pictorial representations we have of Australia before the land was cleared for farming and industry and the cedar forests were logged?

Two billboards by artist Derek Kreckler seek to do just that. These temporary billboard works began with the word ‘appropriation’, referencing the appropriation of Indigenous land, images, and culture by the first European settlement in 1788 and the broader appropriations in the world of the art.

Dharawal man, Roy (Dootch) Kennedy and Kelton Pell, a Nyoongar man from South Western Australia are photographed in front of Austrian-born Eugene von Guerard’s painting, ‘View of Lake Illawarra with distant mountains of Kiama 1860’, part of the collection of the Wollongong City Gallery. The photographs title: *Dootch taking a breather after showing Kelton the best fishing spots*, uses the von Guerard painting as a reference point.

“Dootch is a respected local elder and an interesting character with deep feelings for the local landscape. I wanted to photograph him alongside Kelton, an elder from Western Australia, I wanted the two men to meet and thought the ‘east meets west’ concept reflected the fact that the concept travels beyond the Illawarra, it’s about Australia as a whole,” Kreckler said.

“I think the use of billboards give the pieces immediacy. In an art gallery, people have time to stop and absorb a work but on the road, you don’t have time to view billboards for long,” he said.

“Most billboards are punchy and ‘in your face’, but these works are softer. Because of this, people don’t have time to get the message straight away so they think about it for longer, and maybe take a second look on a following journey.”

“I hope the billboards will spark thoughts of the relationship of the figures in the work to the land as well as that of the viewer. They invite people to celebrate the extraordinary history and culture of Indigenous people in this land, to reflect on our shared history and to imagine the possibilities of the future,” he said.

The billboards are positioned in two locations along the Princes Highway: Heathcoate (driving south from Sydney) and Waterfall (driving north toward Sydney). Derek Kreckler is a lecturer and Faculty member of UOW’s Faculty of Creative Arts.

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