



# BANJ BANJ/NAWNTA SISTER/SISTER

PRESENTED BY THE TORCH  
COUNIHAN GALLERY IN BRUNSWICK

***Art gives me an opportunity to feel heard - I think as an Indigenous woman in the justice system sometimes you feel like nobody cares and art gives me a voice.***

Stacey (Taungurung /Boon Wurrung peoples)

***Painting gives you a reason to yarn up about your stories. If I wasn't painting, I wouldn't know anything I've learnt. I wouldn't know what my totem is, I wouldn't know who my mob was or who my Aunties and Uncles are, I wouldn't know any of that.***

Thelma Beeton (Palawa people)

First Nations language words for sister, used in the title of this exhibition, represent the unique friendship between Thelma and Stacey, two Indigenous artists who are participants in The Torch's Indigenous Arts in Prisons and Community program. Banj Banj means sister in the Taungurung language<sup>1</sup> of the Kulin Nation, and nawnta means sister in *palawa kan*<sup>2</sup>, a language of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

Thelma's and Stacey's lives have been impacted by the Victorian criminal justice system. Their friendship epitomises both the familial bonds that can be forged in prison and what can be achieved when women empower other women. After growing up in the same regional town, Stacey and Thelma reconnected after many years, forming a strong bond during their incarceration together at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, Victoria's maximum security women's prison in Deer Park.

Now separated after Thelma's release from prison, their connection and their support for each other remain unfaltering. They maintain their friendship through daily phone conversations about art, love, life, and culture.

The theme of sisterhood in their artworks emerges through poignant and comical tales and through the direct storytelling depicted in their bold and colourful paintings. In a paradoxical twist, some of these vibrant and playful artworks address why Aboriginal women are more vulnerable to higher incarceration rates than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Other works celebrate the strength, power and resilience of black women as they navigate the justice system together with compassion, humour and heart.

Both Stacey and Thelma recall an event in prison that encapsulates the value of their friendship and cultural connectedness during their incarceration. They were lying on the grass in the prison yard one day, looking up at the sky and talking and laughing. Thelma recalls, "Two galahs flew right above us, squawking really loud as if they were laughing too ... In that moment, we felt spiritually connected to the birds ... It soothed our hearts as if our ancestors were letting us know they were watching over us".

Stacey remembers, "When we were incarcerated together we always watched the birds flying through the jail. One day we saw two galahs and Thelma said that they represent us. Whenever Thelma sees galahs printed on cards she always sends them to me to remind me that we are soul sistas".

First Nations Australians make up less than 3% of the Australian population yet represent 30% of the national prison population. Indigenous women are 21 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous women.

Indigenous women are particularly vulnerable to many of the risk factors that lead to incarceration, experiencing family violence at a higher rate than that of the wider Australian community, and their incarceration has harmful impacts that reverberate widely throughout the community. Many women in the justice system have caring responsibilities not only for their own children, but also for other people's children, and for the elderly and the sick<sup>3</sup>. This has a direct effect on the rate of Indigenous children in out-of-home care, itself a pathway to youth detention and adult offending.

Thelma's and Stacey's strong, bold and colourful paintings generously share their inspiring artistic and cultural journey with the viewer and express the resilience of First Nations women as they navigate a pathway through the justice system back to family, culture and community.

1. With thanks to the Taungurung Land & Waters Council
2. With thanks to the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre
3. Human Rights Law Centre and Change the Record Coalition, *Over-represented and overlooked: the crisis of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's growing over-imprisonment*, May 2017, p5.







# THELMA BEETON

Born 1985

Palawa people

## GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2021 *The Trench*, Dark Mofo, Hobart Penitentiary, Hobart TAS  
2021 *Confined 12*, Glen Eira City Council Gallery, Caulfield VIC  
2020 *Maritime Art Award*, Mission to Seafarers, Docklands  
2020 *Koorie Art Show*, Koorie Heritage Trust, Melbourne VIC  
2020 *Confined 11*, The Torch Gallery & [www.thetorch.org.au/confined11](http://www.thetorch.org.au/confined11)  
2019 *Koorie Art Show*, Koorie Heritage Trust, Melbourne VIC  
2019 *Confined 10*, Carlisle St Art Space, St Kilda VIC  
2018 *Confined 9*, Carlisle St Art Space, St Kilda VIC  
2017 *Confined 8*, Carlisle St Art Space, St Kilda VIC

## EVENTS

- 2020 *Always Was: Always Will Be* NAIDOC Week livestream event, Federation Square, Melbourne VIC

## COLLECTIONS

City of Melbourne, Melbourne  
Specialist Family Violence Court, Frankston  
Epworth Richmond, Richmond

## AWARDS

- 2020 Dennis Thorpe Award, The Torch

## PUBLICATIONS

Bailey, J. Out of jail and into a global sphere.  
*The Age*, 19 May 2020, p 33  
Page, K. Artists freed from behind the walls.  
*The Koori Mail*, 20 May 2020, p 28  
The Torch. *Confined 11: an exhibition of artworks by Indigenous artists in or recently released from prison*. Melbourne, VIC: Wilkinson Publishing, 2020, p 179  
The Torch. *Confined 10: an exhibition of artworks by Indigenous artists in or recently released from prison*. Melbourne, VIC: Wilkinson Publishing, 2019, p 76

# STACEY

Born 1980

Taungurung/Boon Wurrung peoples

## GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2021 *Confined 12*, Glen Eira City Council Gallery, Caulfield VIC  
2020 *Future Dreaming*, The Torch, St Kilda VIC  
2020 *Confined 11*, The Torch Gallery & [www.thetorch.org.au/confined11](http://www.thetorch.org.au/confined11)  
2019 *Artworks from The Torch*, King & Wood Mallesons, Melbourne VIC  
2019 *Confined 10*, Carlisle St Art Space, St Kilda VIC

## COLLECTIONS

City of Melbourne, Melbourne  
Specialist Family Violence Court, Frankston  
County Koori Court, Melbourne  
Coroners Court of Victoria, Melbourne  
Australian Community Support Organisation, Melbourne  
Ramsay Health Care, Melbourne

## PUBLICATIONS

Morris, Kent. *Indigenous Artists: A Selection of the Best - The Torch Collection*. Melbourne, VIC: Wilkinson Publishing, 2018, p 105  
The Torch. *Confined 11: an exhibition of artworks by Indigenous artists in or recently released from prison*. Melbourne, VIC: Wilkinson Publishing, 2020, pp 35, 160, 175  
The Torch. *Confined 10: an exhibition of artworks by Indigenous artists in or recently released from prison*. Melbourne, VIC: Wilkinson Publishing, 2019, pp 62, 63



From top left to right: Thelma Beeton (Palawa people), *Doing Art* 2021, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 cm  
 Stacey (Taungurung/Boon Wurrung peoples), *Crazy New Remands* 2021, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 cm  
 Thelma Beeton (Palawa people), *Talking About Love* 2021, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 cm  
 Stacey (Taungurung/Boon Wurrung peoples), *No More Blue Wren* 2021, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 cm  
 Thelma Beeton (Palawa people), *Havin' a Brew (Coffee)* 2021, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 cm  
 Stacey (Taungurung/Boon Wurrung peoples), *Kookaburra* 2021, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 cm  
 Thelma Beeton (Palawa people), *Prison Calls* 2021, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 cm  
 Stacey (Taungurung/Boon Wurrung peoples), *Busy Bees* 2021, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 cm  
 Thelma Beeton (Palawa people), *In the Mail* 2021, acrylic on canvas, 40 x 40 cm



Above: Thelma Beeton (Palawa people) *24K Magic* 2021, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 90 cm  
 Cover: Thelma Beeton (Palawa people) and Stacey (Taungurung/Boon Wurrung peoples), *Banj Banj/nawnta* 2021, acrylic on canvas, 89 x 75 cm

Banj Banj, sister in the Taungurung language, with thanks to the Taungurung Land & Waters Council  
 nawnta, sister in *palawa kani*, the language of Tasmanian Aborigines, with thanks to the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre

Artwork images: Mick Bell Photography

## BANJ BANJ/NAWNTA SISTER/SISTER

24 JULY – 5 SEPTEMBER 2021



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