

Zena Cumpston

Barkandji people, New South Wales

For several years I have researched and written about the plant knowledge and foodways of our people. Each of the artworks I have made explore the interrelationships of people, plants and animals on our Barkandji Country. I see my developing art practice as an exciting new way to explore my research, to map my learning, to share far and wide.

I have included kopi, which is gypsum from our Country that is processed to make a white pigment utilised in traditional mourning practices but also, importantly, for joyous occasions such as painting our bodies for ceremony and celebration. Through each of these works I celebrate our knowledge, but I also mourn how rarely our knowledge as First Peoples is respected and empowered.

Today, the bush foods industry in Australia generates around \$80 million in revenue, and by 2025 this is estimated to double. Sadly, less than 2% of the benefit of this industry goes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

To draw attention to what I see are very strong parallels between the Aboriginal art industry and the bush foods industry, I have incorporated text to reference the work of Kamilaroi, Kooma, Jiman and Gurang Gurang activist/artist Richard Bell. Specifically *Bell's Theorem; Aboriginal art it's a white thing!* that critiques disparities in benefit.

Circles signpost a portal into Aboriginal knowledge of Country and signify return – return to our traditional foodways, our plant knowledge, our holistic land management practices. Circles speak to the foundational importance in our culture of true reciprocity, never taking without giving back.

In all of my work I call for the empowerment of our people, of our deep knowledge and skillful management of Country, for the benefit of all.

Easy read

I mourn that since the invasion of our lands we do not often get to eat our traditional foods, developed over many thousands of years to keep our people strong and healthy. I celebrate the many ways our people have kept our plant knowledge and knowledge of Country strong, despite the many ongoing challenges we face as colonised peoples.