

**Reko Rennie*****Pink Diamond (Foil) 2016***

Reko Rennie-Gwaybilla (known as **Reko Rennie**) is a contemporary artist of Kamilaroi heritage and the son of well-known First Nations artist Biggibilla Gummaroi. He was born in 1974 in Footscray and is currently based in Melbourne. Although he works across a range of disciplines and media, Rennie is best known for his stencil art, which spans both street art and fine art contexts<sup>1</sup>. A self-proclaimed 'young punk,' he did not undertake formal artistic training but discovered graffiti as a young man and became deeply concerned with the dislocation of First Nations peoples in urban environments. He says, "I grew up in the city, and I've got that connection. I'm an urban Aboriginal dude, I'm comfortable with my identity, and that's what I try to portray in my work."

Rennie mixes traditional First Nations iconography with contemporary styles, including Op art, Pop Art and the principles of graphic design, which feature prominently in his work, along with vivid colour. Much of his work utilises three hand drawn symbols—the crown, the diamond and the Aboriginal flag, which are presented as symbolic statements about the original royalty of Australia, and as a subversion of the romantic ideologies of First Nations culture.

**The diamond, the crown and the Aboriginal flag**

Rennie's work features the repetition of these three symbols, depicted in bright, pop colours and often featuring neon pink.

- ◇ Rennie was granted permission to use the scar tree 'diamond' design, a traditional symbol of the Kamilaroi people, through his familial connections.
-  Rennie's use of the 'crown' motif is a reference to American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat's signature emblem. Basquiat's practice of countering western histories saw him present black men as saints and kings, and included his heroes such as athletes, artists, writers and musicians.
-  Rennie's use of the Aboriginal flag reinforces his pride in his cultural heritage.

<sup>1</sup> Laura Fisher, Reko Rennie-Gwaybilla, 2011/14, interview/article <https://www.daa0.org.au/bio/reko-rennie-gwaybilla/biography/>



Reko Rennie  
*Pink Diamond (Foil)* 2016  
synthetic polymer paint and metallic foil  
on linen  
61 x 61 cm  
Heide Museum of Modern Art  
Donated through the Australian  
Government's Cultural Gifts Program by  
Anthony Scott, 2018

*Pink Diamond (Foil)* was first shown in Rennie's solo exhibition *Visible Invisible* at Blackartprojects, Melbourne in 2016. Appearing several times in this exhibition, the diamond motif is one of three key symbols in his art. As Rennie explains:

*Three hand-drawn symbols ... are presented as an emblematic statement about the original royalty of Australia. The crown symbol pays homage to my graffiti roots and to [New York artist] Jean-Michel Basquiat, but most importantly reminds us that Aboriginal people are the original sovereigns of this country. The diamond symbol is emblematic of my connection to the Kamlaroi people: like a family crest, it is a part of me. The hand-drawn Aboriginal flag in the form of a graffiti tag pays respect to all Aboriginal people, from environments both urban and remote, and anywhere in between.*

—Artist statement on his neon light work *Regalia* 2013, in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria, <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/108708/> (accessed 13 June 2018)

Rennie's diamond shape, his nominated 'family crest' as seen in *Pink Diamond (Foil)*, is derived from traditional Kamilaroi designs carved into scar trees for ceremonial purposes, such as marking a gravesite. He renders the diamond with curved edges, a modification that stems from the hand-drawn spontaneity of a graffiti tag. The painting's metallic silver and neon pink colours are typical of Rennie's exuberant, high-keyed palette, and signal the distinctly contemporary character of his work.

Tony Elwood, Director, National Gallery of Victoria, wrote:

*Reko Rennie confidently embraces neoteric materials of neon, spray-paint, graffiti, and signage to create psychedelic proclamations of political resistance. He adopts the shiny, hard-edge patterning of modern advertising to represent Kamilaroi diamond-shaped incisions on carved trees that were previously confined to ceremony. He thereby moves backwards into the future, giving ancient symbols a contemporary, urban edge, and asserts his indelible connection to the Kamilaroi people.*

—Catalogue for "No Sleep Till Dreamtime" exhibition, Chalkhorse Gallery, Sydney, 2014,  
<http://rekorennie.com/work/no-sleep-till-dreamtime-a/>, (accessed 13 June 2018)

### **Analysing an artwork**

Rennie's heritage includes the Kamilaroi people (alternatively spelled Gamilaroi/Gamilaraay in different contexts). Locate this group on this alternative map of Australia depicting First Nations groups: <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia>

Rennie's use of the diamond motif is drawn from the Kamilaroi practice of creating not only scar trees, but also carved trees. The Kamilaroi and Wiradjuri peoples typically carved trees to indicate initiation and burial sites. Further information can be found here: <https://www.anbg.gov.au/aboriginal-resources/Burial-Trees-colour.pdf>

What does the title of the work suggest? What ideas does it conjure?

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Why do you think Rennie chose to utilise street styles, referencing Op Art and Pop Art conventions, and what meaning does their use communicate to viewers?

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How has Rennie used the Art Elements of **shape**, **colour** and **line** and how do these add meaning for the viewer?

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How has Rennie used the Art Principles of **emphasis/focal point**, **repetition (pattern)**, **variety** and **unity**, and how do these add meaning for the viewer?

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If you could interview Reko Rennie, what questions would you ask him?

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