

## The art and legacy of Trevor Nickolls – interpreted by Kat Bell

### AIARTS Gallery - Artists: Kat Bell and Trevor Nickolls

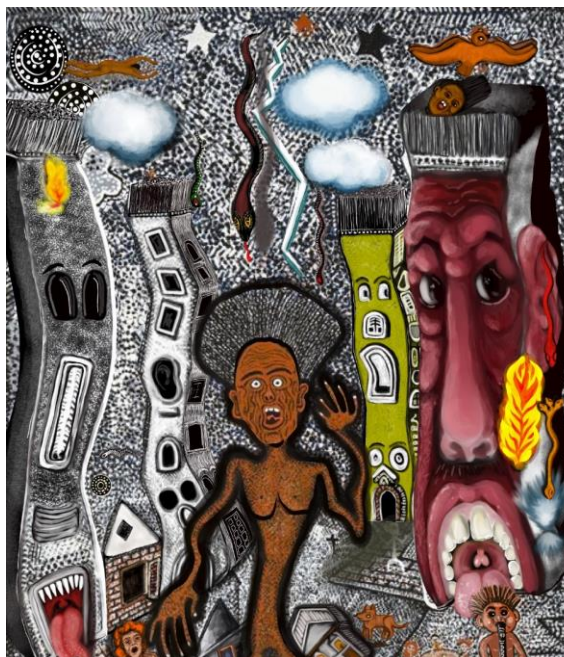
This exhibition curated by Kat Bell is a conversation across time. It explores the legacy of groundbreaking Aboriginal artist Trevor Nickolls through innovative contemporary interpretations by Bell, presented in a fusion of physical and digital mediums.

Bell, a Gudjal and Giramay artist and curator, blends painting and sculptures with new-media technologies to create immersive representations of First Nations stories and cultural narratives. Her curatorial approach integrates interactive digital elements to deepen audience engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives.

The exhibition features original works by Nickolls alongside interpretative pieces by Bell, incorporating augmented reality (AR), animation and moving-image art. Bell also presents new paintings and sculptures inspired by Nickolls' distinctive artistic style and use of symbols, unusual objects and futuristic themes.

Often referred to as the 'father of urban Aboriginal art', Nickolls (1949–2012) created powerful visual statements reflecting pivotal moments in colonial engagement, using complex iconography with multiple layers of meaning. His early friendship with Warlpiri artist Dinny Nolan and the political activism surrounding the Aboriginal Tent Embassy fuelled his artistic motivation, leading to works such as *Deaths in Custody* (1990) and later *Brush with the Lore* (2010).<sup>1</sup>

In his pursuit to bridge the contemporary and traditional, Nickolls developed the concept of 'Dreamtime to Machinetime', to articulate the cultural transition that people navigate when moving from a traditional life into a mechanised, technology-driven world, which he often depicted as dystopian. Nickolls' works of art explore the tensions and interactions between these two realms, highlighting the challenges First Nations peoples face in balancing cultural identity within Australian society.



Trevor Nickolls *Urban Scream* c1993 overlay of Augmented Reality by Kat Bell 2025

Bell builds on these themes, using new media to explore how Nickolls' vision of cultural transition can inform contemporary First Nations storytelling. Her curatorial lens invites audiences to engage with Nickolls' legacy through their own eyes — and smartphones — bridging past, present and future.

The exhibition also includes Birrala Nyina sessions, or Sit-Down Talks, hosted by Bell. These yarning circles invite audiences to reflect on Nickolls' art, Bell's curatorial practice and the evolving role of digital media in First Nations storytelling, fostering dialogue and cultural understanding.

Nickolls' artistic influence spanned the world. Through the 1980s and 1990s, his art was included in seminal international exhibitions, which, history shows, have had a profound effect on the promotion and acceptance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art as a significant contemporary art movement in the world.<sup>2</sup> He and Rover Thomas were the first Aboriginal artists to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale, in 1990. In the same year, Nickolls' art featured on the cover of *Time* magazine's Australian edition, alongside the headline 'Black Art Breaks into a White World: Boomtime for Aboriginal painting'.<sup>3</sup>

Spanning works from the 1970s to the 2010s, the exhibition highlights key themes in Nickolls' practice, including his iconic 'Dreamtime to Machinetime' concept, and offers a shared storytelling experience shaped by two visionary artists.

### Kat Bell and Angelika Tyrone

<sup>1</sup> *Deaths in Custody* is in the National Gallery of Australia's collection, *Brush with the Lore* is in the Art Gallery of South Australia's collection.

<sup>2</sup> Wally Caruana, catalogue essay for AIARTS Gallery exhibition *Trevor Nickolls: look both ways: Dreamtime to Machinetime*, November 2010, unpublished.

<sup>3</sup> *Time*, Australian edition, vol. 5 no. 29, 16 July 1990, cover. The featured painting was Nickolls' *Inside Looking Out* (1987), held in the National Gallery of Australia's collection.