

## Konstantina

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**Nathalie. How do you say Australia in Gadigal?**

**Konstantina.** This is an interesting thing, there is no word for Australia. We don't believe in the entire country, we believe in our own section of it. Which is why we are so good at caring for our country, we each look after our plot and then together that works. Rather than try to do too much and doing nothing particular well, each group looks after its own. So the Gadigal people are of the Gadi place : G-A-D-I is our place, our definition of place, and Gadigal , and «gal» at the end means people of Gadi, of that place. The only other way that we refer to ourselves is by our geographical link, from the top of New South Wales to Victoria are Koori.

So I'm a woman and I'm Gadigal. We don't have a word for Australia, that's a very Western construct.

**Nathalie. It makes me think that now New Zealand is called Aotearoa in original Maori language?**

**Konstantina.** I think it's interesting because the Kiwis, the Maoris : the Traditional Owners of that land all speak the same language, there are slightly different dialects but they speak the same language. Whereas in Australia there were originally more than 500 clan groups like Gadigal, 500 hundred different languages. So it's such a rich context for Culture and life. We've got so much still to learn, and develop.

**Nathalie. How do you say colour in Gadigal?**

**Konstantina.** Again, we don't have words for these things. We have names for pigments, like when we paint, but we don't see them as colors. So, you see a red pigment that would be used in ceremony, like a red ochre is the same word as fire. Everything for us is directly reflective of Country, of our physical place. What you see, what you eat, what you care for, everything has symbiosis, it's all one group, which is beautiful.

## THE SENS OF COLORS

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**Nathalie.** It's very interesting! because in France, we name the colors, we say yellow, red ochres from the south for example, we know where to find them, we know the symbolic as well, but in a way, we have lost the connection from the word's origins. A language is a vision of the world, it's not an empty sound, or just a names, it's much more than this.

**Konstantina.** Yes, images, you conjure images. I think, because we were such an ancient Culture, our conjuring for things comes from things which are related, do you see what i mean? Red is fire, that makes sense, it's much more a relationship with the land and the Country more generally but also related to Ceremony, so what it's been used for, that's the way we name things.

**Nathalie.** Does the use of a specific color have a symbol, or has a signification in Gadiga Culture? For example, if I take pink, does it have a special meaning in the painting?

**Konstantina.** It depends, it's not a traditional element necessarily. For me as a contemporary painter I try to bring relationship with color and story together, wherever I can. I think it's important, in a contemporary context, color triggers our feeling, what we see, our emotional response. Blue for me, I'm a salt water woman in Gadigal, so blues always attract me and are able to give me a sense of calm and a connection to that salt water. But I suppose using different colored natural pigments and ochres, depends where I get them from.

I can feel really emotionally connected, and like to trade ochres with other Aboriginal people. I have made my paint for some of the series out of ochres , and I can tell you where every single one is from. I used to, when I first started doing it, label all the containers. When I would mill and make it into powder, I'd say: this one comes from Arnhem Land, this one came from Bidjigal country etc... I don't need to do that anymore.

You end up with such an emotive reaction to seeing rocks... you know when somebody has posted you an ochre, and said «This is a treasure from my land», again it's a visual reference, and an heart reference. I know exactly where they are all from, I know who sent them to me, I know if I got them myself, I can tell you if it was raining, I can tell you which one of my children helped me. It becomes so much more than a color or a medium to use, it becomes a part of the process, like the memory of the process.

Like when you go on a holiday and you buy a cup or a cheap magnet, you think «I went to Paris, here's the magnet on my fridge to prove it», it's that same relationship, you know, the doing something ,for me it's the doing. The collecting of the ochre, the crushing of the ochre, what happened that day, all of that. It sounds quite spiritual perhaps, but it feels to me like it's a very true Cultural way to embed learning and memory into the each of the paintings.

So they feel much more meaningful, like there's a whole other layer to them than just being pretty or just being about the topic that I'm exploring. They become part of the place that I got the ochres from and the day that I milled it, the day I made it.

Part of my practice is about reflecting on my identity. So I spend a lot of my time meditating on, I suppose, the questions around what we as Aboriginal people would have done and how we would have done it. So things like, we followed the cycles of the moon.

So when it was daylight, that's when you woke up and when the sun went down, that's when you went to bed was like this perfect natural clock that guided our lives.

The moon was an opportunity for us to know the tides and be able to read the sea, and to know when it was safe or when the fish would be running. Then we would read the stars. Depending on where the stars were, we knew what time of year it was, when to harvest food, what to eat. So quite simply, we had all of the available knowledge that we required without any sort of commercial tool to tell us, we didn't need a watch. We didn't need any of that mechanical structure.

It actually was all based on nature. Some really smart person, once upon a time went: «Hang on a minute, I can work out from the moon and the stars and the cycles. What time it is?».

It just became convenient. We always had it.

So I think that when people have this feeling of overwhelming safety and calmness and oneness with nature, it is because we are actually innately connected to nature. We follow all these patterns. We don't know that it's 6 a.m. because we look at our clock. Our body inherently knows that.

Even things like women's cycle is based around the moon cycle, same amount of days as a moon. We are absolutely, inherently connected. It's all the stuff that we are taught makes us that unlearn that connection, that makes that connection go away and be reliant on things other than self.

My practice, whilst it's absolutely all about my identity, it's also a very big and very dynamic meditation of unlearning all of the crap that I don't need in my life.

**Nathalie.** Okay, so, you know, you answered a lot of my questions because I had «Does colour have a meaning for you?».

**Konstantina.** Yes, yes, yes, totally.

**Nathalie.** And is it a language?

**Konstantina.** Absolutely. Yeas. Well, it complex way of reading the land. When you forage for your own pigments you can read flood or drought and many other things.

You know, it's almost a practice when I use these natural pigments of telling the land's truth, of dictating its language, ...

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...what the land has to offer us is a story. And by using it only what you need to use, there's no requirement to go and get 7000 rocks. **You know, you take what you need and leave the rest because it's, again, it's that sustainable practice of not needing to overuse everything over commercialise.**

...

its talk. It's so big. So it's honest. It's what it is. It's honest. There's no need to mess with it or make it better or pinker or greener, it's just honest. It's not manufactured. It's not fake. It's just honest.

**Nathalie . That's why it's really important to work with colour that you can find around you. But you can exchange as well.**

**Konstantina.** Absolutely, absolutely. So, you know, there's beautiful humans not just in Australia. There are people all over the world that are venturing into amazing colours and pigments. The one thing that I would always suggest is to pause in caution. You're on people's native lands, it's always very good to seek permission before you just go and start hacking into rocks.

But I think that, what the land has to offer us is a story.

And only use what you need, there's no requirement to go and get 7000 rocks. You take what you need and leave the rest because it's a sustainable practice. I literally go and get the rocks that I need to do the paintings only.

**Nathalie . So I can send you a bit of Parisian pigments. I'm extracting at the moment.**

**Konstantina.** Please Yes. I love that. We can trade.

**Nathalie . Do you work with natural bindings for the pigments.**

**Konstantina.** I do. In my commercial practice though .I must use acrylic binders to ensure the quality and the longevity of the work. And the reason for that is really simply if you go to any museum and you see anything that's been treated with natural pigments or ochres with a natural binder, sooner or later. It won't last forever. It's not stable for a commercial environment.

**Nathalie .But in other environments it's stable.**

**Konstantina.** Yeah. That's right. But in a commercial environment where you have to move the paintings, they're constantly moving, they're rolled, they're stretched, they're pulled. It doesn't work, They crack. You find that you get a lot of cracks. So I have developed myself a method to over come that. I'm sure there's other people that have done it, but I've developed an acrylic fixative that I use.

And for me that gets the best result. So what it does for me is it allows the texture of the ochre to remain honest and true, but it allows me to pack the work, send the work, stretch the work without breaking it, because that would be sacrilegious in itself if you were using egg white or acacia gum and then it all cracked off, it would be just wasteful.

**Nathalie.** In Australia, but in different parts of the world as well, we need to learn from people who still are connected to their land, to nature like you. For example, here in Paris, we are totally disconnected to nature, which is a really different feeling in Sydney for example, the nature is still really present in the city.

**Konstantina.** It kills me. I went to the Quai Branly the other day. And there were these trees out the front, I almost hugged them, I was like, «oh my God, green things.» I wanted to take off my shoes and run in the grass.

**Nathalie.** Today and in the future, we need to connect to the land and to understand more, I feel like the First Nations are a hope.

**Konstantina.** And we sort of were doing it seamlessly for, what, 60,000 years? You would think that sort of got it right. Yeah. Because we're still here. And then all of a sudden this whole Western, mindset of like mechanisation and industrialisation was realised and go, go go capitalism erupted. It's only really lasted, what, 200 years and it's not going very well. So 60,000 years, we still had all the fish, all the animals, all of the shorelines. We weren't, choking on our own pollution. I think that there's a lot of knowledge, not just in pigments, in so many different areas that our First Nations mobs can teach us.

**Nathalie.** It's a way to be connected to life.

**Konstantina.** Of course.

**Nathalie.** Josef Albers says that colors have magical power.

**Konstantina.** Is it the same for you?

Absolutely, look at my exhibition. Yes. It's possible to create absolute joy. It's got to be magic, otherwise, everything would be grey and boring. Colour is joy. It's an expression, even if it's a muted tone or, a non-offensive, beige, it's still telling you a story.

**Nathalie.** Do you have a physical sensation with colours? I mean, when you see them or creating and working with them, do they have an identity or personality? When you work with them, is something happening?

**Konstantina.** Absolutely. Like being excited, getting excited about the story that you're telling and then finding the way and the medium to do it, is exciting. Full stop. It's like creating your own book, you know, I'm sure it's the same sort of experience an author has when they're writing. They're like, «oh my God, it's coming together». It's the same when you're an artist. You think, this is what I want to do. And the first thing you do is walk into your studio and think «With what?» And that's the

## COLORS CONNECTION WITH KONSTANTINA

part where the magic is; I want to tell the story. What am I going to tell it with? That's why my studios are a mess.

**Nathalie.** Do you have do you have a message or advice for experiencing colors ?

**Konstantina.** I think: Just touch them. That's my biggest thing, I'm really tactile. And I think that working with natural pigments especially, is when you touch them and you start to mill something with your hand, it becomes part of you like it becomes part of the story, physically touching things. We've been taught by Western society that, you look and you don't touch. Which is so obtuse. Why wouldn't you touch something that looks nice? If you're in nature and you see, lovely swaying grass, you want to touch it. So I think color for me is visceral.

**Nathalie.** That's funny because, we went to New Zealand last summer and we were in an exhibition of Aboriginal and Maori paintings, when a women came and touched a painting! everyone was so shocked.

**Konstantina.** I'd always touch them. My kids always touch them. I get in trouble from my husband. He's like, «stop encouraging them to touch them» because one of my children put a whole hand straight through a wet canvas once. I still let them touch them because it's visceral.

**Nathalie.** Do you have a special color memory or a special a significant moment? When you went to collect them, or just when you see them in the nature?

**Konstantina.** Yes, I did a solo exhibition that was all using natural pigments and ochers from my Country, the Eora nation. And I got to one place called Berowra Heights, on the Hawkesbury River, which is where some of the most horrible things happened to Aboriginal people. I got there, I was on my own. I had no idea where I was, I'd never been to the place before, this specific area. So I just followed Google Maps and found a spot right on the river, and I parked my car. I don't know why I parked there, but I did, and I got out and there was a bit of a bushfire trail into the forest. I thought, I'll go have a look.

So I trundled into the forest. I was looking for a beautiful escarpment all the way down to the river, and such big stories from that place, like such so much pain and so much suffering. And I was really feeling it that day, I'd been to a few areas already and I could feel the Country wanting me to tell some really big stories, and I didn't know whether I was emotionally ready for it or whether my arts practice was ready for it. I don't even know what it was, but this overwhelming feeling to turn around came up on me. And I turned around and I looked up the entire escarpment, which was completely vertical. And there was a huge overhanging rock, which was definitely a lookout.

I ended up with superhuman strength and I climbed up and there were beautiful ocher handprints that had been there since the dawn of time. I mean what a joy. I just sat there and cried and cried... Somebody wanted me to go up. And as I climbed down, I went straight down to this little part of the river bend. And all of this beautiful deposit of beautiful orange, gorgeous, like, almost pink oranges were just sitting there already in little rocks. They're just sitting there. I just picked them up and I thanked the ancestors and I got in the car.

That's the most overwhelming experience that I've had. And I didn't even know where I was. I just was guided to be there and I was in a really physically unsafe place, but I felt so held and safe.

So that's my way to end. I think that, when you can tune in to some of this stuff. It's like this beautiful, cosmic force that allows you to see what was already there that you would not have seen otherwise. So I feel really blessed that I get to share some of these stories with you.

**Thank you.**

Interview de Konstantina réalisée par Nathalie Redard