



PARLIAMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS**

Exhibit 15

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Bec Mac: Hi. Bec Mac here with Fake Art Harms campaign, and I'm in another incredible artist's studio. We're still here in Brisbane and we're still in the Yeronga precinct, where all these incredible artists are, and I'm with the one and only Vernon Ah Kee. How are you? Oh, not Vernon Ah Kee! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! I knew I'd say that. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! I said that to you at the Brisbane Writers Festival. Ha, ha, ha!

Gordon Hookey: Vernon, you hear that?

Bec Mac: Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Gordon Hookey: I got called Vernon Ah Kee!

Bec Mac: Gordon Hookey. I'm with Gordon Hookey. Oh, my God! I'm so embarrassed. I'm so sorry, Gordon. Do people often mistake you two?

Gordon Hookey: Oh, yeah. Vernon Ah Kee here!

Bec Mac: Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Gordon Hookey: I normally paint portraiture and draw and do text work and film and video, and I've also represented Australia in the Venice Biennale, yeah. And yeah.

Bec Mac: You're very practised at this fake art—ha, ha, ha, ha! I'm so sorry. I apologise.

Gordon Hookey: That's cool. That happens a lot, because all of us blackfellas are the same!

Bec Mac: I know. I think I've said it before. Now, this is epic. What is going on? You've got this incredibly enormous metres and metres of white canvas. What's going on there next?

Gordon Hookey: Well, this is the second part of a series that I'm working on called *MURRILAND!*, and it's just about the history of Queensland from a blackfella perspective. And what happened is that I've just got a time line of history of things that happened right from the beginning of time and each one of those points that is significant—I just do a picture of it or imagine a scenario and do a picture of that.

Bec Mac: So you're almost like doing the history. You're documenting history.

Gordon Hookey: My interpretation of it, yeah, through pictures as well. But, yeah, again it's my interpretation of that history, so it's not actually a history painting. It's a painting about history, if anything.

Bec Mac: And this is the second part. You just presented some work, the first part, at *documenta*. Is that right?

Gordon Hookey: Yeah, yeah, at *documenta*. Initially it was a commission from a project called Frontier Imaginaires, from a curator—an Australian curator—that's based in Amsterdam. And, yeah, she commissioned me to paint the history of Queensland, being influenced by this Congo artist called Tshibumba who painted the history of the Congo. And as you—well, the history of Congo is quite brutal as well. So he done 101 small paintings on events and things that happened, you know, in the Congo's history. And I viewed those paintings, and she commissioned me to do something similar.

Bec Mac: Yeah.

Gordon Hookey: But, you know, of course different, because history is different all around the world, yeah.

Bec Mac: Do you feel overwhelmed when you consider the width and the breadth of what you're actually interpreting here?

Gordon Hookey: Not really, no, because, you know, I'm just within it, and also, you know, I only, you know, work within the context and confines of what's happening, you know, within my project as well. And of course, you know, I've been making art for, you know, well over 30 years as well, so, you know, it's just another work of art—another picture, basically.

Bec Mac: Yeah.

Gordon Hookey: It's just like *documenta*, biennales, the show at the artist-run initiative work, you know. It's just kind of another show.

Bec Mac: I mean, other people—have they said, 'I've got *documenta*, biennale'? Like, they're epic places to be. Like, congratulations. As you're saying, it's amazing where you're at right now.

Gordon Hookey: Yeah. Oh, well, it's good because, you know, no matter what—whether I'm doing it for my son's kindy or whether I'm doing it for *documenta*—it's still just a picture to me, yeah. Yeah.

Bec Mac: Yeah. So, talking about art, let's just move over here, because we've got this beautiful work behind us. We're talking about fake art, so what do you perceive as the major impacts of fake art on the community?

Gordon Hookey: Well, first of all, I guess, trying to understand what fake art is, sort of thing, as well. I mean, the term 'fake' I've heard—what's that? Trump? Yeah, yeah, Donald Trump used 'fake news', sort of thing.

Bec Mac: Yes.

Gordon Hookey: So I guess, you know, he popularised the term 'fake' and, you know, it's a good way to describe art that isn't real, I suppose, as well—

Bec Mac: Yes.

Gordon Hookey: because I've encountered that, you know, in the past as well, because, you know, with Native American culture as well—the appropriation of that by hippies or alternative—

Bec Mac: Yes, wearing, like, headdresses.

Gordon Hookey: Yeah, as well. Like, I was telling this friend about this woman in Nimbin somehow—how she kind of got permission from a so-called elder or a shaman in the States to do sweat lodges, and her name was Little Deer or something like that—you know, Running Deer. I don't know. But anyway, yeah, she was doing sweat lodges and conducting these, you know, uber sort of Native American rituals or ceremonies, you know, because of the permission she so-called got. But anyway I told this Native American fellow about it, and he just laughed and he said, 'Oh, look, we call that cowboy sweat, you know.' And I said—and she said what we had to do is relocate it so it doesn't affect us. It's not real. It's gammon. It's pretend. What we have is the real thing.

Bec Mac: Yes.

Gordon Hookey: Like, that is, you know, your fake thing. But, you know, that's when I encountered it, a good 10-15 years ago as well.

Bec Mac: Yes.

Gordon Hookey: And, you know, my attitude to that is, you know, as a blackfella, as an Aboriginal person, as a native person, you've got to position these things in such a way psychologically that it doesn't affect us in a harmful or dramatic way, simply because it is so widespread, you know. And, you know, like, our culture, our tradition, is so exploited by non-Aboriginal peoples and by the tourist industry that, you know, if we're going to confront it this once we have to do it every time.

Bec Mac: Yes.

Gordon Hookey: And then, you know—

Bec Mac: Exhausting.

Gordon Hookey: Exhausting, and I just got no time for my own art or my own life, basically, as well.

Bec Mac: Yes.

Gordon Hookey: And not only that. Like, you know, with Aboriginal culture, our tradition, the way we are, like, we're a diverse people. Like, there's over 500, 600 different nations in this country and, you know, we all got our own tradition, our own lands, our own country, our own language, our own way of practising, our own communities. And, you know, you can't chuck a blanket over all of us and say, you know, like—I can't speak for the people that steal dots, you know, when someone appropriates dot work, because I don't do dot work. I don't paint that way, and I feel I haven't got the right to condemn someone that is stealing from another nation, you know—from the desert area. I feel I haven't got the right to do that, but the best I can do is tell them that this person is appropriating and stealing your intellectual property, your spiritual knowledge or, you know, things that are yours—things that are close to you.

Bec Mac: Yes.

Gordon Hookey: And that's the best that I can do as an artist myself, because basically I don't do tradition-oriented art. For me, my art is based on the interface where blackfella art and non-Aboriginal art converge, and really, you know, when I look at the reality of it, I really have more in common with the whitefella artist than I do with the tradition-oriented artist that is painting about their land and their country. My art is Aboriginal in content.

Bec Mac: Yes.

Gordon Hookey: But I'm commenting on political scenarios and I'm commenting on events that actually happen now and events that affect me as a blackfella living in a community, you know, within the city as well.

Bec Mac: Yeah, yeah. So, in regards to, like, the parliamentary inquiry, like, making legislation, you know, what you're talking about is one thing. We're talking more around, I guess, legislation around stopping fake souvenirs, but that's pretty clear. Is there any way that what you're talking about, the appropriation of IP and the theft of, like, intellectual property—of Aboriginal intellectual property—and the theft of culture—do you think there's any way we can make that law, that that's illegal?

Gordon Hookey: Well, that would be good. You know, you shouldn't steal, basically. I mean, that's pretty—

Bec Mac: Ha, ha! But some people are really good at it!

Gordon Hookey: Yeah, yeah. Given that we've had our whole land and everything stolen and, like, it's a continual thing. It's like cultural colonialism, basically. I mean, I was just talking to, you know, my friend Judy just a while ago, and she showed me this little photo of a snippet of some traditional-oriented work, and it's got, you know, a headline on the top or some text on the top, going—or, you know, 'Wonderful, beautiful traditional art from our natives', or 'from our Aboriginal people'. It's like they own what we do. They own us, but only on their terms. There is, like, a power relation there, which is, you know, a very colonial way of thinking. And, like, I mean, as far—

Bec Mac: It's just like a product that white Australia thinks it owns, like a brand.

Gordon Hookey: Yeah.

Bec Mac: Like, Aboriginal art's like a commodity in a way.

Gordon Hookey: Yeah, yeah. Well, it's all part of the colonial psyche, you know. It's something that—I mean, you can hit us with the terms, you know, 'postcolonial' and 'colonialism' and all those prefixes and suffixes and, you know, that are on that term 'colonialism', but it's the same old for us. It's the same old, you know, colonialism, and it's within, you know, governmental thinking and the thinking today. So, you know, like, it's, you know, hard to fight and struggle for us to—yeah. But, you know, I would welcome any little positive move, be there a small or large as well. But, you know, for me personally, with the work that I do, you know, it's—well, I'd be happy. It'd make me happy if someone was to steal my work—ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Bec Mac: Ha, ha! Why do you say that?

Gordon Hookey: Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! Ha, ha, ha! It'd be a compliment that someone would want it so much that they would steal it.

Bec Mac: Yeah, right.

Gordon Hookey: You know, because, you know, like, you know. I mean, look at this. I mean, I've got an effigy of John Howard here with a spear through his chest.

Bec Mac: Ha, ha!

Gordon Hookey: So, you know, if someone was to appropriate that and take it, good, you know.

Bec Mac: Ha, ha, ha!

Gordon Hookey: Yeah. Ha, ha, ha!

Bec Mac: Put it on a T-shirt!

Gordon Hookey: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, yeah. John Howard can put it on his wall!

Bec Mac: Ha, ha! So what can we do more to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and help promote their work?

Gordon Hookey: Oh, that's a hard question. Yeah. Like, I mean, there's so much. I mean, just educate, not so much—yeah. Get grants. Just educate—not so much. Educate yourselves, basically.

Bec Mac: Yes.

Gordon Hookey: For the white people to educate themselves. That's the best, yeah, rather than, you know, put the onus on us. I just feel that it's the whitefellas that have to do it for themselves, to themselves, instead of, you know, asking us all the time to come up with the answers, because the whitefellas are the one that created the problems and stuff like that, so it should be them that fixes it as well.

Bec Mac: Yes.

Gordon Hookey: And not only—yeah, it gets quite exhausting in the end, you know, having to explain, you know, to, you know, whitefellas about us. I mean, there is a course called BlackCard course in order to work with blackfellas. I think whitefellas should do the BlackCard course and educate themselves.

Bec Mac: I like that idea.

Gordon Hookey: Yeah, yeah. It's quite funny.

Bec Mac: Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Gordon Hookey: It's quite funny, because you've got a blue card or something to work with children. You've got a green card to get into the States. Then you need a BlackCard if you want to talk to me—ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Bec Mac: Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! I think you should start that!

Gordon Hookey: No, well, it is started.

Bec Mac: Oh, it is?

Gordon Hookey: Yeah, Auntie Lilla Watson and Auntie Mary from the Gold Coast. Yeah, they run the course, so yeah. So this is kind of a little advertising for that.

Bec Mac: Get your BlackCard, folks!

Gordon Hookey: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Oh, it's a fantastic concept, yeah.

Bec Mac: Just around the fake art—I guess the souvenir thing—like, what can we do as a community to stop it itself—like, back to us whitefellas' responsibility?

Gordon Hookey: Look, if it's fake art—if, you know, whitefellas that are doing it, you know—then, you know, that's problematic, you know, as well. But also, you know, especially up in Cairns, you know, there is a lot of blackfellas—and north, you know. And there is a lot of blackfellas that are doing derivative work, you know, from tradition-oriented stuff, and there's nothing wrong with that, because they're making money from their tradition and their culture.

Bec Mac: Yeah.

Gordon Hookey: You know, that's fantastic. I say good on them, you know. I wish I can make money from it!

Bec Mac: I think you're doing all right. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Gordon Hookey: Oh, I wish! But, yeah, it's okay to be in these big shows and all that, but if we're not getting any money from it, you know, I can't live. I can't, you know, provide for my family. So. But, you know, like, so I don't, you know, condemn anyone who—any blackfellas who make art from, you know, practising their culture, their tradition, by doing art, sort of thing. I guess, you know, the problem is—what we're talking about is when whitefellas exploit that, and that's so widespread that, like I said earlier, you know, where do I start? Maybe there should be native police specifically, you know, to just go around looking for that, and then, you know. So, yeah, that's something, maybe, that the government can do is give money to the native police to police whitefellas that are stealing blackfella art.

Bec Mac: I love that, and I'm going to see a performance piece about that.

Gordon Hookey: Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! But as it is, like, I'm not really qualified to talk on this, because, you know, the work that I do is urban based sort of, yeah, yeah, political art, sort of thing, as well. But I certainly, you know, understand, because there is a really strong connection to country and, you know, a lot of works that are done by, you know, tradition-oriented artists are based about that very connection as well. You know, I feel the connection to land and my country, even though I don't make art about it—but, you know, to ceremony and ritual and things like that. Like, I don't take work or appropriate work, because of that significance, but when you do see others doing it—other non-Aboriginal people doing it—it's so unjust, that's all, yeah—outrageously unjust, yeah.

Bec Mac: Well, thank you so much, Vernon, and good luck. When do you head off back overseas?

Gordon Hookey: Vernon again!

Bec Mac: Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! Gordon! I got you! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! It's Gordon. I knew that. Ha, ha, ha, ha!

Gordon Hookey: Ha, ha, ha!

Bec Mac: Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! So you're heading off in April—

Gordon Hookey: Yeah.

Bec Mac: with this piece?

Gordon Hookey: Oh, maybe. I don't know. I'll see if it's finished or not—ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Bec Mac: Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! Good luck, and I am with Gordon Hookey—ha, ha, ha, ha!

Gordon Hookey: Not Vernon Ah Kee.

Bec Mac: Not Vernon Ah Kee—ha, ha, ha, ha! And thank you so much.

Gordon Hookey: Well, actually, no! I'm Richard Bell!

Bec Mac: I was going to say that. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Gordon Hookey: Much more handsome, of course!

Bec Mac: Absolutely! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

Gordon Hookey: Is he listening? I hope he is.

Bec Mac: Thank you so much for your time, and good luck with the show.

Gordon Hookey: No worries. Yeah.