

Murals of Shoalhaven High School

1988-2025

Aunty Pat Lester

Peter Botsman

This paper has been written to record over 40 years of Aboriginal art at Shoalhaven High School which in turn is a record of Aboriginal education in regional NSW since the creation of the Aboriginal Education Unit in 1973. It documents some of the artworks in the school but there is much more to record, hopefully these pages will inspire more oral and written history to emerge.

20 September, 2025



I

Elizabeth Phelps documents the first murals painted at Shoalhaven High School in 1988. Aboriginal studies students painted “Spandula” a ‘mythological dreamtime serpent’ who lives near the Beecroft Peninsula.¹ A second mural depicted “Bundoola” another mythological dreamtime creature of the Beecroft Peninsula. A third mural portrayed Aboriginal leaders and identities of the Shoalhaven region².

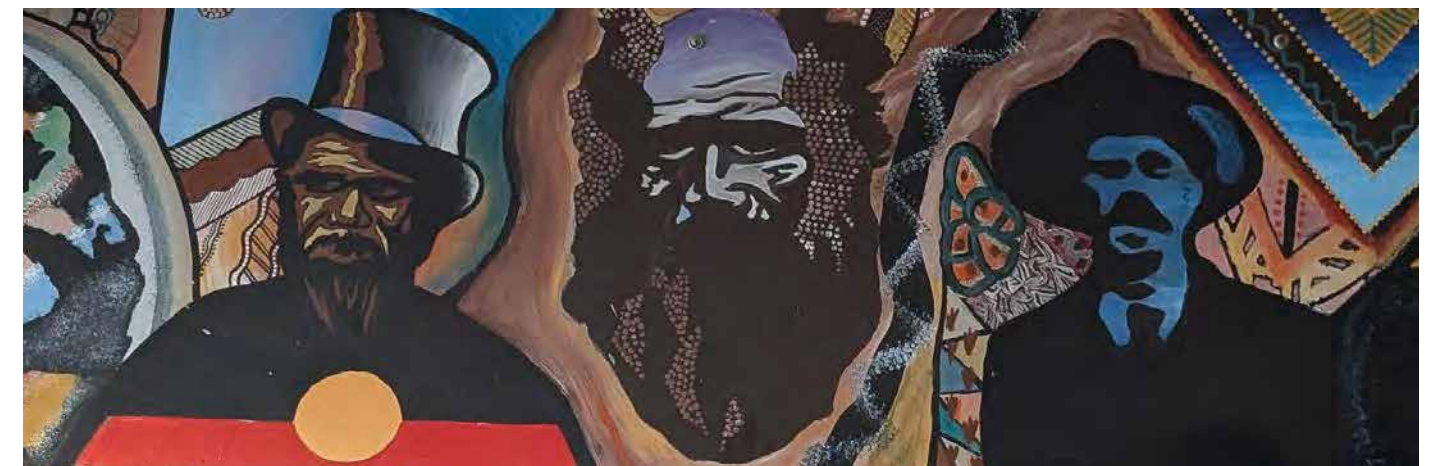
Phelps interviewed Bill Harrison³, Loretta Parsons⁴ and Ruth Sims⁵. Following the creation of the Aboriginal Education Unit in NSW in 1973 and the introduction of Aboriginal Employment Assistants⁶ (AEAs) in the Shoalhaven in 1975 progress was made in building up Aboriginal self-esteem and confidence. Loretta Parsley said that AEAs were role models that helped students to be “proud of their Aboriginality and believe in their own self-worth”.⁷

AEAs significantly improved relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children because often they were “the only Aboriginal people with whom many whites ever have any contacts”⁸.

In this period there were very few Year 12 Aboriginal graduates and there is evidence that many were discouraged from continuing their education. Aboriginal studies was introduced into the NSW school curriculum in 1982.

Many of the Shoalhaven High murals were designed in that important and optimistic time in NSW education. After Aboriginal studies began the first Shoalhaven Aboriginal students were formally noted as completing Year 12 and progressing to tertiary studies. Aboriginal students were five times less likely to complete Year 12 at the time. Phelps notes the inclusion of the new curricula was not just a practical improvement, it also led to greater recognition and encouragement of Aboriginal culture and leadership.

Only one of the three murals Phelps recorded in her thesis has been found.⁹ This depicted Aboriginal leaders of the Shoalhaven region including “King Mickey” of the Illawarra. It currently hangs above the Aboriginal Education Officer’s room at Shoalhaven High but there are many additions to the walls, doors and rooms that are a real indicator of how Aboriginal education has fared over the past forty years.



1 Elizabeth Phelps, “A long time to learn’The process of Change amongst the Aboriginal People of the Shoalhaven 1960-1989”, Bachelor of Arts Honours Thesis, University of Sydney, 1989

2 ibid

3 Aboriginal Education Office in the Department of Employment, Education and Training in Nowra

4 Aboriginal Education Assistant at Nowra High School

5 Aboriginal Education Assistant at Nowra Primary School

6 Aboriginal Employment Assistants (AEA were re-titled as Aboriginal Employment Officers (AEO) in the late 1980s as part of a shake up between Commonwealth and NSW Government education policy

7 Phelps, op cite, p. 45

8 Phelps, op cite, p. 43

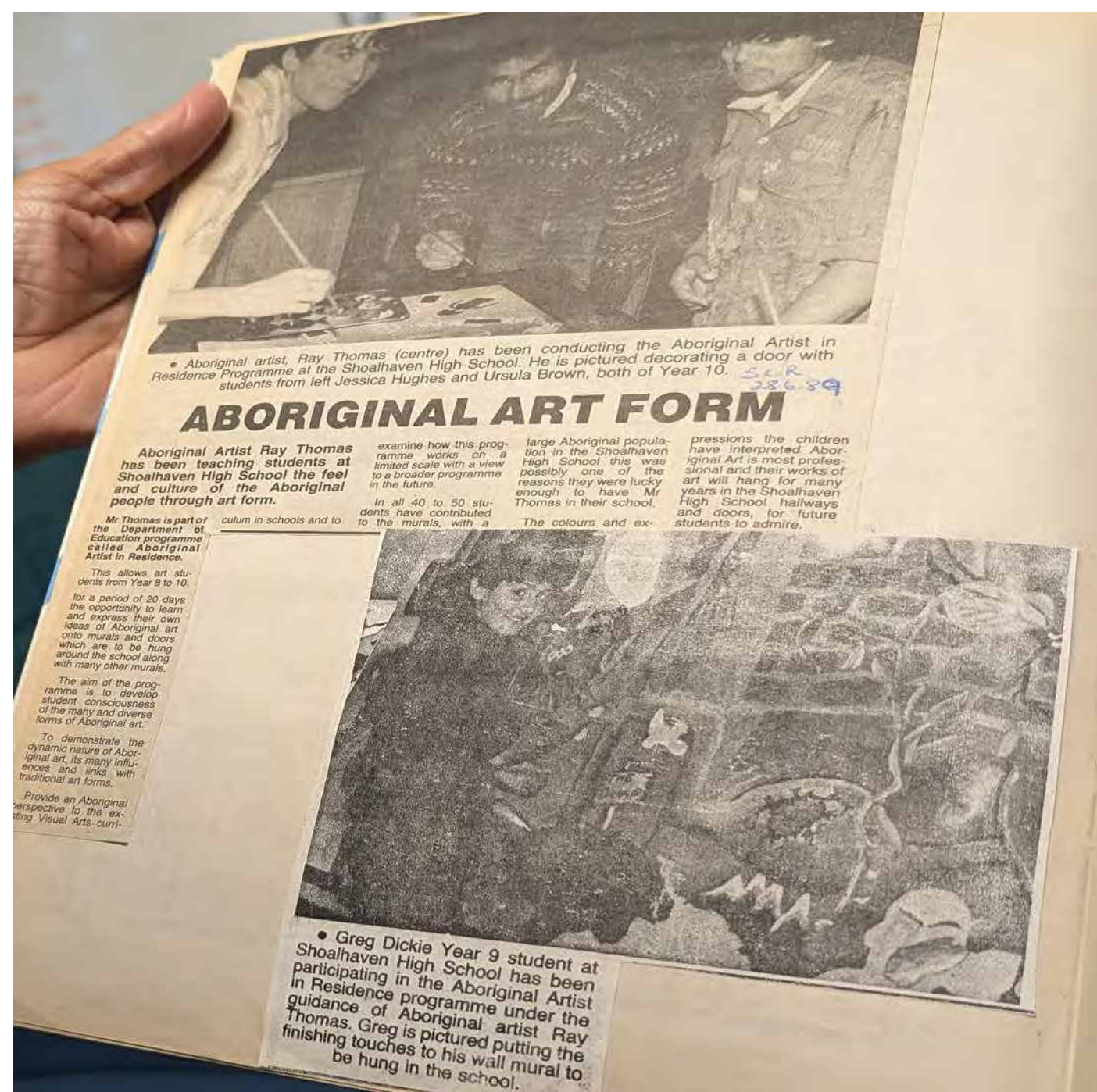
9 The mural is displayed on the cornice above the Aboriginal Education Office in Building C.

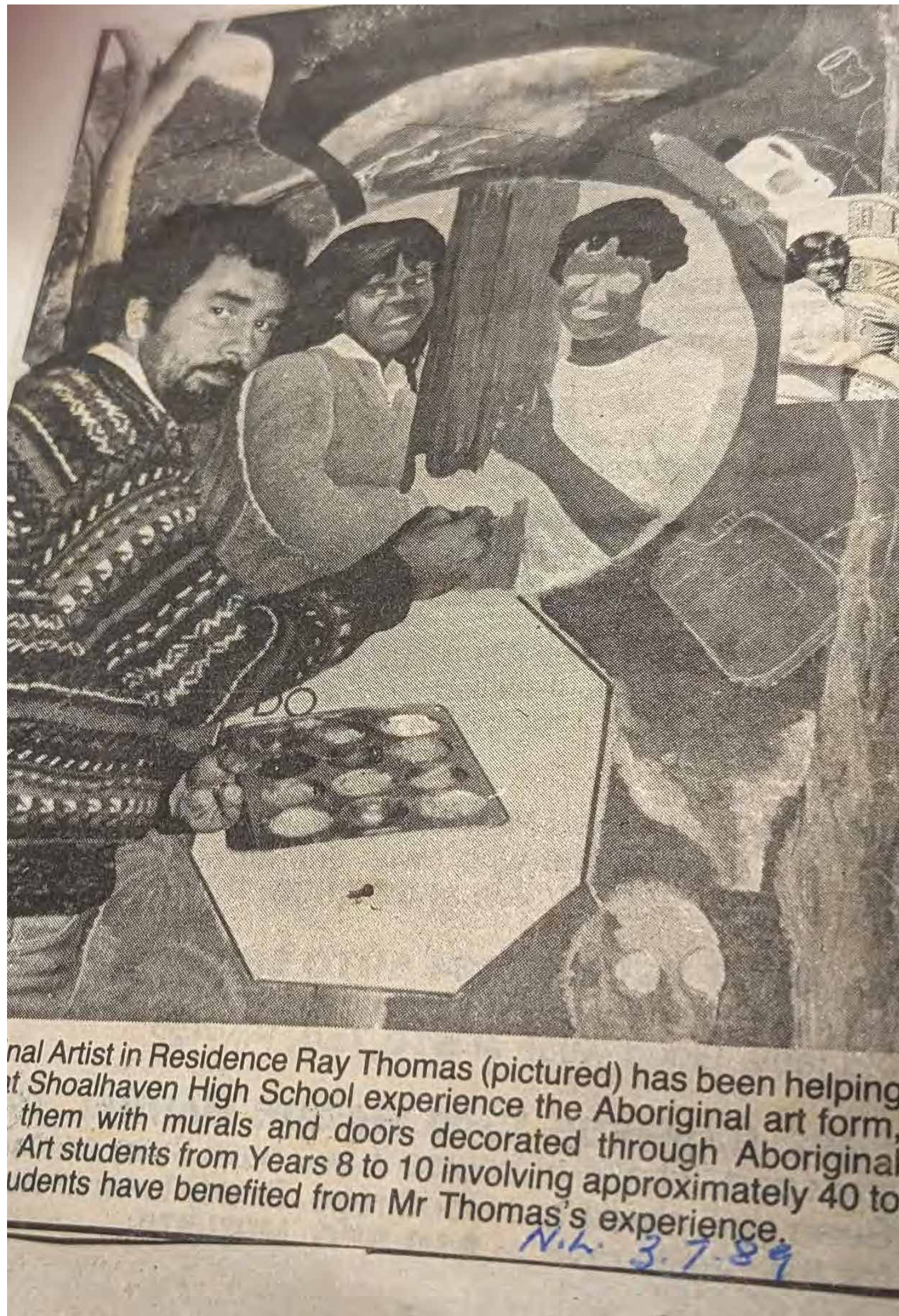
Ray Thomas, a noted Gunnai artist, was employed as Artist in Residence at SHS for twenty days working with Years 8-10 in 1989. Several of the murals Ray completed with the students still proudly stand in the school and are a reference for former past and present students at school.

The faces of former students in the paintings help new students to feel comfortable with school. In the mural below there was a message of caring for the environment, but the students at the heart of the painting have had many relatives follow their footsteps and it gives them a special confidence and comfort to see the mural. This mural is at the foot of the stairs in C Block – the mural features Aileen Mc Cleod and Bradley Ardler. Since the painting there have been generations of Mc Cleods and Ardler children coming to the school as well as many other relatives.

Ray curated one of the oldest murals in the school originally noted and photographed by Elizabeth Phelps. It hangs above the Aboriginal Education Office door in Block C. The mural depicts Aboriginal leaders of the Shoalhaven region including King Mickey of Illawarra.

Ray's work also includes a door to the connected community office door in C Block.





III

One of the unique but little noted characteristics of the Nowra area is the living Yuin culture that tracks stories back to a time when the Australian continent had active volcanoes and giant marsupials. Cheryl Davison curated a notable mural with Shoalhaven High students in December 1991 that demonstrates this deep knowledge. It may well be one of the most important symbolic art works of the South Coast.

Cheryl has major works in the Australian Museum in Canberra¹⁰ and the mural depicts one of the most important traditional stories of the South Coast. White cockatoos fly through the erupting Cambewarra (mountain of fire) resulting in black cockatoos (Nowra).

The deep meaning of the story is about balance and equity, the ying and yang of the local region, where all things have a place and family. This central theme is bound by the ever present serpent Spandula and many of the local totemic creatures of the Yuin, Dharawal, Jerrinja, Wadi Wadi communities.

Cambewarra is visible in the far distance from the school. The mural reminds students and all who come to the school about the rich traditional culture of the South Coast. Amongst the students who worked on this significant mural were Dean Thomas, Jamie Mc Cleod, Sonya Williams, Dennis Wellington, Naomi Locke, Kevin Brown, Lauren Jennings, Joe Brown, Justine Brown, Kylie Bundle, Sue-Ann Brown, Bobby Mc Leod, Darren Mc Leod, Larry Mc Leod, Megan Brown, Byron Wilson, Megan Sproats and Les Little.

The mural is displayed in the main corridor of Building C and over a week a large number of students and staff pass by the mural.

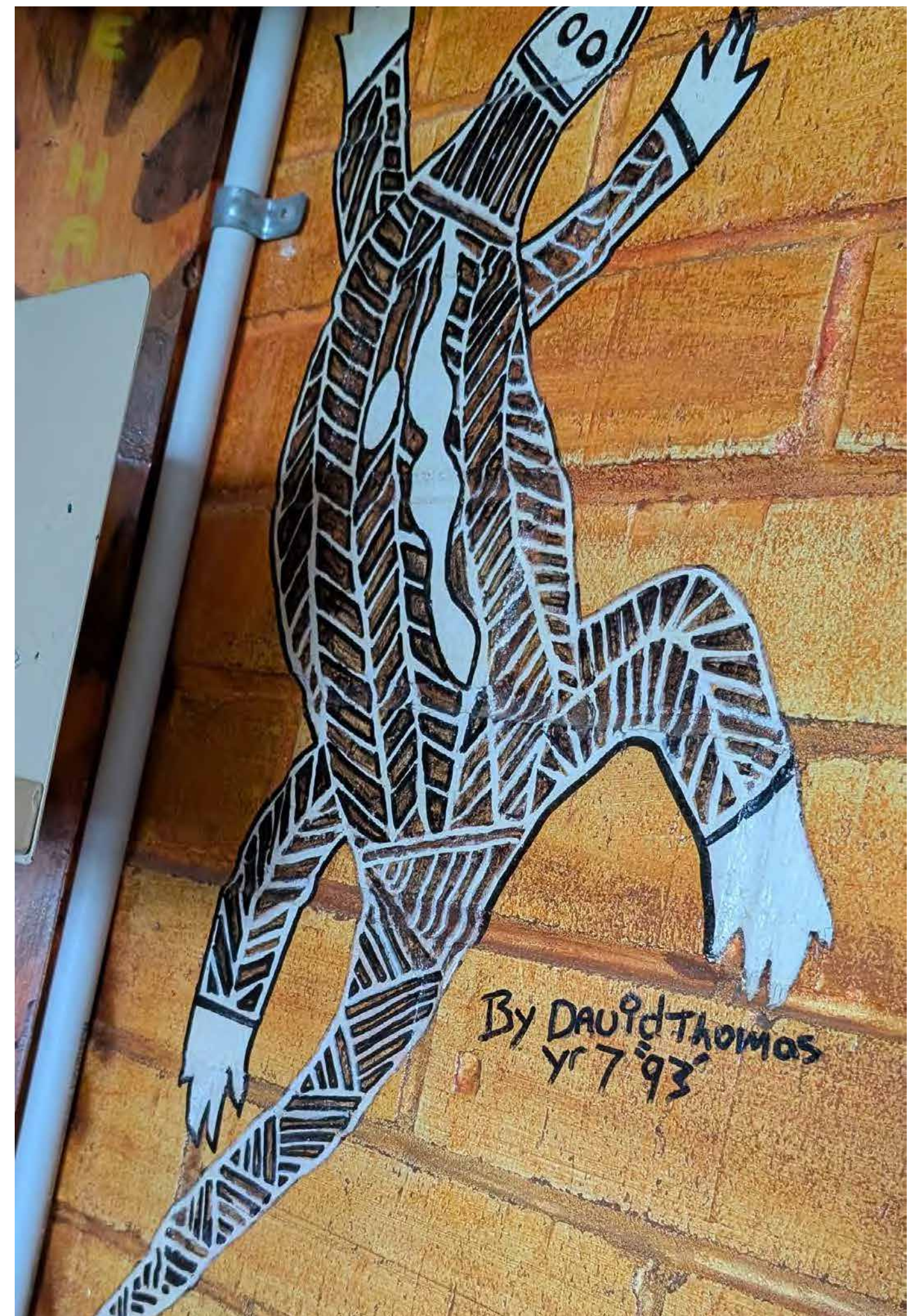
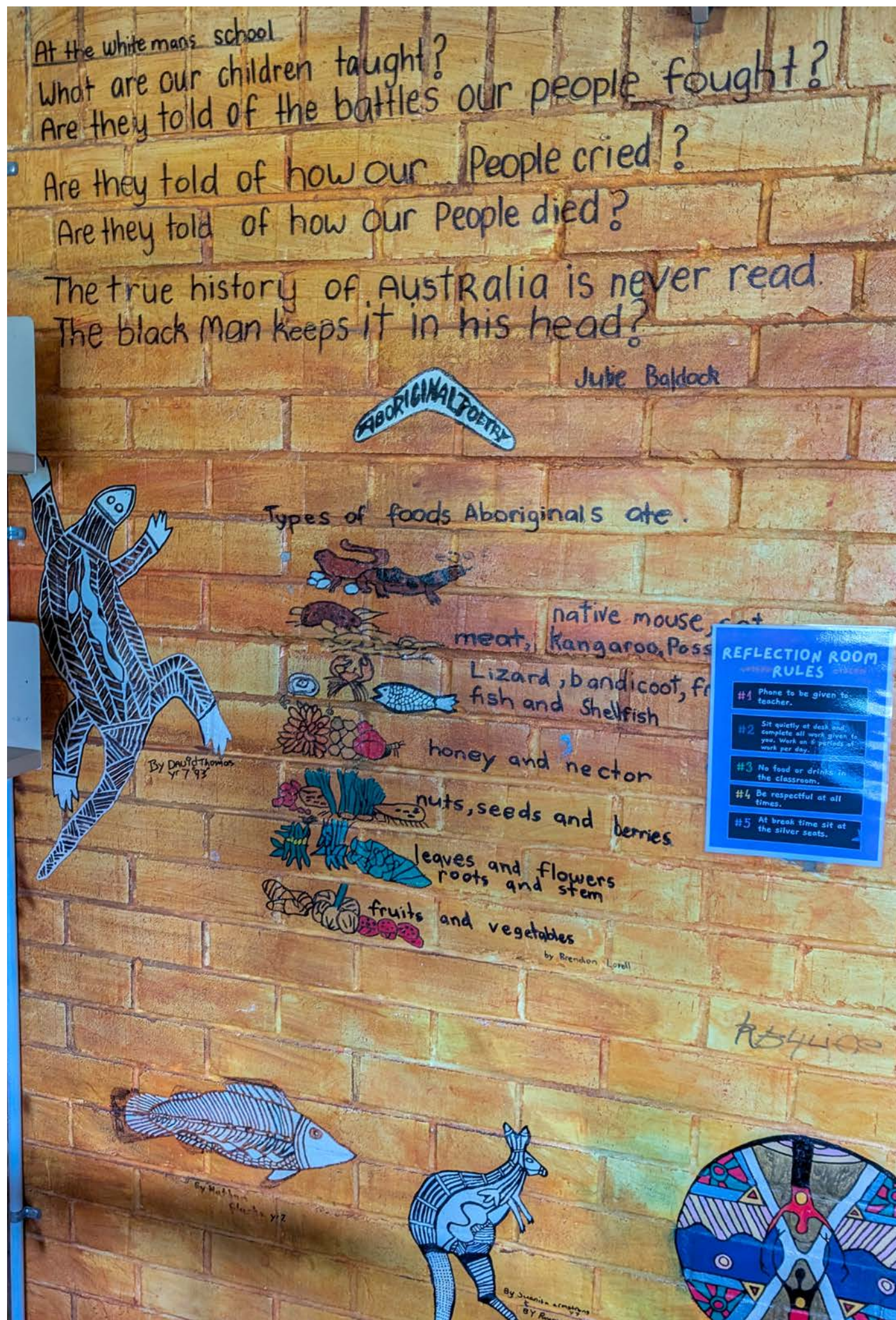
¹⁰ Cheryl Davison is a Walbunja, Ngarigo artist. As a child she spent precious time sitting next to her grandfather in his old wooden boat on the shores of Wallaga Lake on the Far South Coast of New South Wales. Cheryl's grandmother was a Ngarigo woman from the Snowy Mountains region of New South Wales. As a young child, Cheryl's grandmother was stolen away from country and never had the chance to return home in her lifetime. Growing up, Cheryl felt privileged to be around many of her Elders and the community, listening to stories of the Yuin people. Cheryl has studied and taught visual arts, graphic arts and printmaking. It was these foundations that shaped her life and fostered the artist and storyteller that she has become, exhibiting nationally and internationally. She also sits on the Gulaga National Park Board of Management that governs the direction of care for the Yuin people's beloved and sacred mountain. Cheryl is dedicated to her people, committed to healing the rifts caused by Australia's devastating colonisation and steadfast in honouring her elders' visions for her people and culture to be united, and strong — reasserting themselves in a world that is in desperate need of this ancient wisdom.

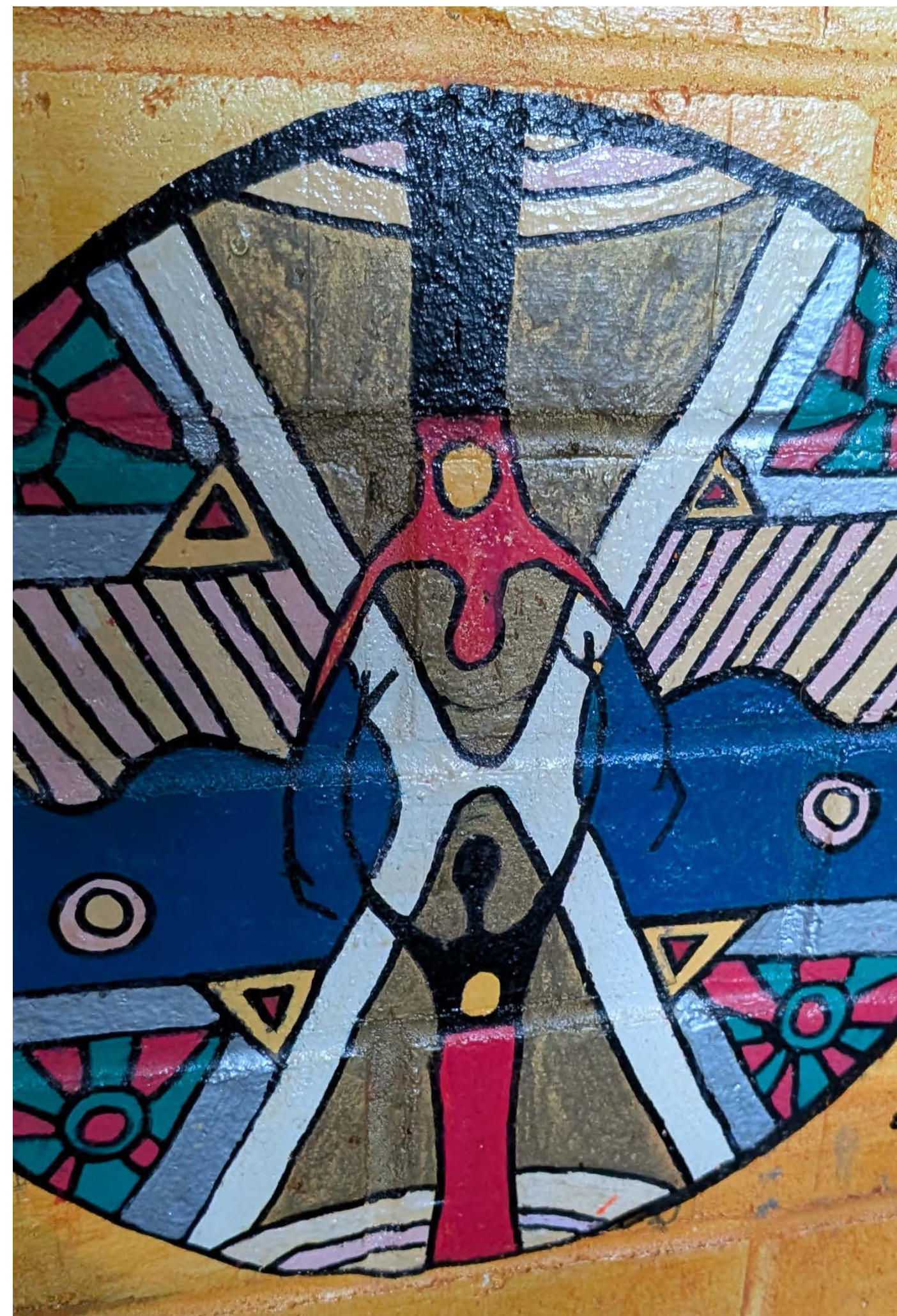


IV

“Room 4” was the original room in which Aboriginal Studies was first taught at Shoalhaven High. 200 students participated in decorating the walls over two terms in 1993. Over the 12 years since the images were painted they have remained intact with little damage or deterioration. The students created a host of facts about colonial prehistory and archaeology as well as noting the acts of Aboriginal leadership that occurred after colonization. It was a great environment to learn and think about Aboriginal studies. The room is a symbol of the emergence of Aboriginal studies within the school curricula that is of ongoing significance to NSW, especially as the inclusion of an Aboriginal curriculum gains further traction with the treaty in Victoria. Aboriginal communities are asking for a more comprehensive and deeper and more Aboriginal centred teaching and learning process. “Room 4” is a great historical artefact of earlier times and of the first wave of Aboriginal awareness emerging in schools in NSW.









V

A significant art work completed by Shoalhaven High School students, staff and Aboriginal elders is the mural which still stands proudly at [Bomaderry Creek Regional Park](#). Some years after the closure of the Bomaderry Children's Home, in 2009, Shoalhaven Aboriginal elders developed an idea to commemorate the children who had come through the home. Create a mural sited on what would have been the playground and escape for many 'Bomaderry Children' over the eighty years of the home's existence. An artwork of remembrance on a place of special significance.

Planning for the artwork involved the collaboration of areas of government (education, national parks) and was driven by the vision of Aboriginal elders. It is no wonder now that the mural is revered by the community and is a favourite picnic and meeting place.

Bomaderry Childrens home was a place very young children under 10 were taken from their families in the 'Stolen Generations' era of NSW Aboriginal history. Many families came to the Shoalhaven after tracking their children down to Bomaderry but were unable to have any formal contact with them until they reached adulthood. The home left a shadow of sometimes unresolvable trauma for the Nowra community so it was important to find a way of dissolving the tension while telling the story of the many brave children who had such a confusing and troubling journey through life. The mural was designed as a symbol of healing, that celebrated renewing lost connections and dealing with the misinformation, dislocation and unthinkable lies of the era. The symbols and feeling of the mural carry a special calm and emotional feeling.

Auntie Lena Bloxsome, Auntie Jean Davenport, Auntie Pat Lester, Auntie Jean Wellington, Auntie Hazel Miller, Auntie Barbara Timberry, Auntie Nola Roberts, Auntie Evonne Wellington (Shoalhaven Aboriginal Elders and Friends) and the staff of the National Parks and Wildlife service along with Aboriginal studies students and staff from Shoalhaven High School planned and enabled the mural. The very special feeling of the mural is a testimony to these powerful woman and the fact that elders and school children all had relations and lived experiences that all evolved from the home.

Footprints signify the children who came to Bomaderry Children's Home as babies and left as adolescents. This was the lived history and experiences of Aboriginal educators and students at Shoalhaven High. Representing this the footsteps that border the mural are the actual footprints of Boori/Pre-School (small), SHS students, (medium) and elders and NPWL personnel (adult size feet).

The creation of the mural shows the very close relationship that existed between the elders, the community and Shoalhaven High School in the 2000s. It was a high point of twenty years of Aboriginal Studies being incorporated into the NSW school curriculum. Before this time Aboriginal students were often discouraged from staying at high school and Aboriginal history was simply ignored by the mainstream educational curriculum. By embracing the difficult part of local history and turning it into a constructive monument of healing the community moved forward. The strongest and most meaningful change always occurs when there are local Aboriginal elders at the heart of the school's work. The Bomaderry Mural will last for many, many years to come and is a lasting testimony to all of those involved.





The art of reconciliation

from sadness comes strength

Bomaderry Creek Regional Park and its surrounding bushland is vitally important to local Aboriginal people. It is a spiritual place. It has provided food and shelter, and a place to recreate in beautiful surroundings.

Located downstream is the Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home. Following its closure in 2009, Year 11 and 12 students and staff from Shoalhaven High School wanted to acknowledge the home and the effect it had on Aboriginal people. They designed and constructed this mosaic.

The mosaic begins with the clay footprints of the Elders. The story spans pre-colonisation to the present with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal footprints leading out of the sad period of recent history centred around the Bomaderry Children's Home. The inclusion of frogs, platypuses, tortoises, fish and other animals reflects the coexistence of Aboriginal people with their environment. The mosaic ends with footprints of children walking together to a positive future.

The mosaic tells a story of survival, connection and reconciliation.

Aunty Lena Boxstone (left) grew up in Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home. For most of his life, he never knew his family. He finally met his brother when he was around 10 years old. Aunty Lena Boxstone (left) grew up in Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home. For most of his life, he never knew his family. He finally met his brother when he was around 10 years old. Aunty Lena Boxstone (left) grew up in Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home. For most of his life, he never knew his family. He finally met his brother when he was around 10 years old.

Many children grew up at the home as babies and didn't leave until they were eligible for placement in Kooragang Island or Cooragang Island. Gally Home when they reached 18 years of age.

a sorrowful era

By the early 1900s, many Aboriginal people had become reliant on European settlements for basic supplies and services. They set up camps on vacant land on the outskirts of towns including along the creek at Bomaderry in a place known as Frog's Hollow.

Just a short distance away, the United Aborigines Mission established the Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home in 1908. Most of the children arrived at the home as babies or toddlers and never saw their families again. Many children were stolen; others were put into care by their families or the authorities when their parents died or were unable to look after them.

The children were occasionally taken on picnics here in the bush beside Bomaderry Creek. Outings were few and far between and the picnics were a highlight of their austere lives.

This photo was taken in the grounds of the Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home in the 1970s.

working together

As you wander along the serene trails of Bomaderry Creek Regional Park please give thought to the children of Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home, and reflect on its past and ongoing significance to Aboriginal people.

This artwork would not have been possible without the support and assistance from:
 Shoalhaven Aboriginal Corporation of Elders and Friends:
 Aunty Lena Boxstone, Aunty Jean Davenport, Aunty Pat Lester,
 Aunty Jean Wellington and Uncle Gordon Wellington
 Teachers, staff and students of Shoalhaven High School
 Staff and Students Boon Preschool
 Leonie Barrackoff
 NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service staff

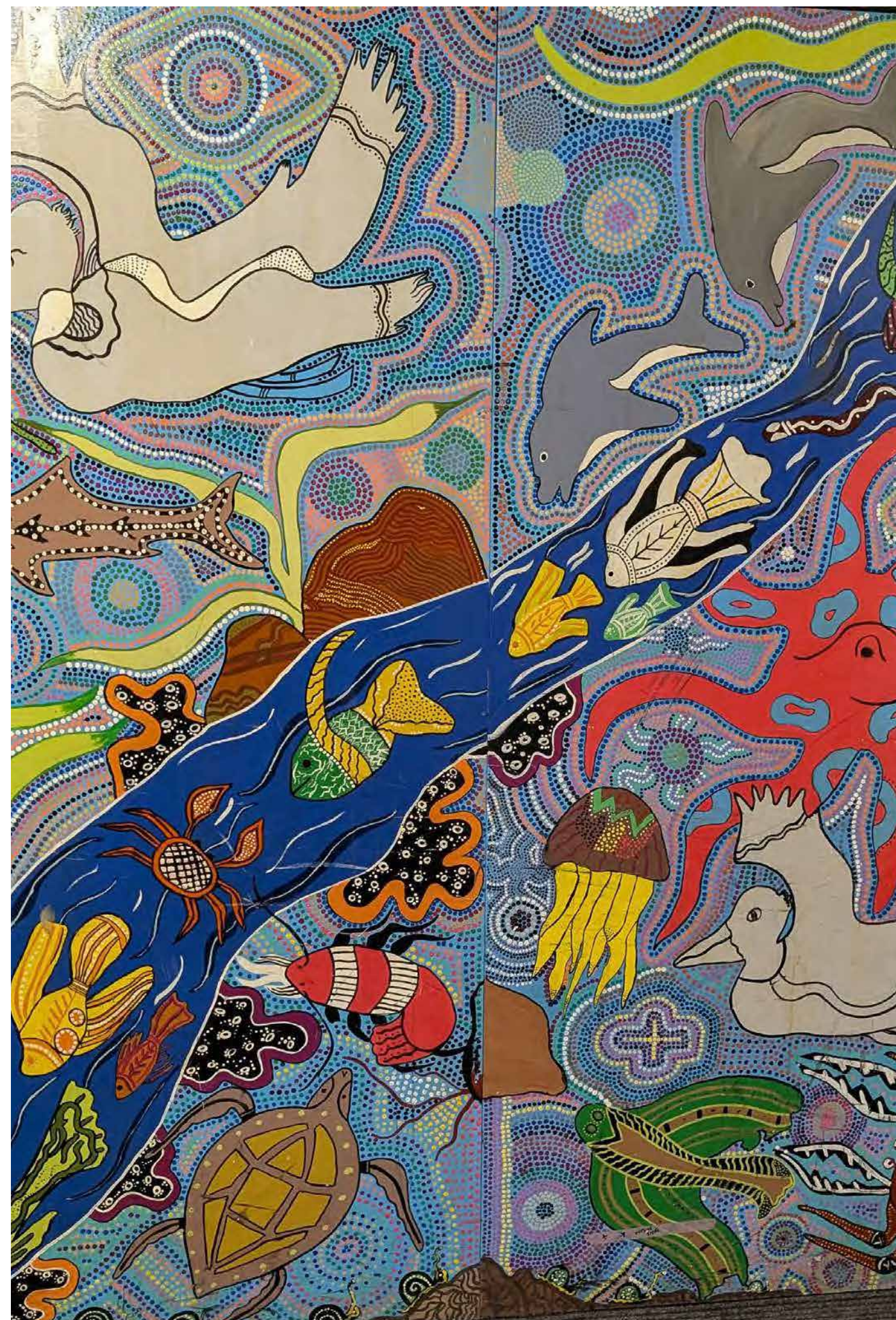
VI

In 1992 Aunty Lorraine (Thomas) Brown, premier artist of the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation, and her sister Narelle Thomas, supervised the creation of the mural above which also hangs in Building C. Coomaditchie and the Hill 60 community are important custodians of local Aboriginal knowledge and stories. Lorraine is a Yuin/Jerrinjah woman born in Bega, one of 7 children. She uses bold colours that reflect her coastal upbringing. “We’re East Coast Saltwater People”, Lorraine says. “My colours symbolise my life. I had a great childhood, great parents and family and extended family”. Many students that attend the school have a strong relationship with their sea country and the painting is very much appreciated as students progress from Year 7 to 12.

Coomaditchie artists have created many community connections and greater understanding through public art works. Over the past thirty years they have collaborated with many organisations on the South Coast and Illawarra. The Shoalhaven High murals are a reminder of the longevity of the Coomaditchie artists contribution to local culture. Aunty Lorraine’s knowledge of local history advanced student knowledge of their history, their families and their relationships to their land and sea environment.¹¹

Lorraine and Narelle also curated a series of surprising ceiling murals adjacent to the Aboriginal Education Officers room and library. Giant goannas and the sun are expertly painted and look down from above. These works are feats of ingenuity and creativity. They appear in a surprising way and over years students and staff all find them in their own ways on different occasions.

11 <https://illawarrastories.com.au/aunty-lorraine-brown-interview-transcript/>





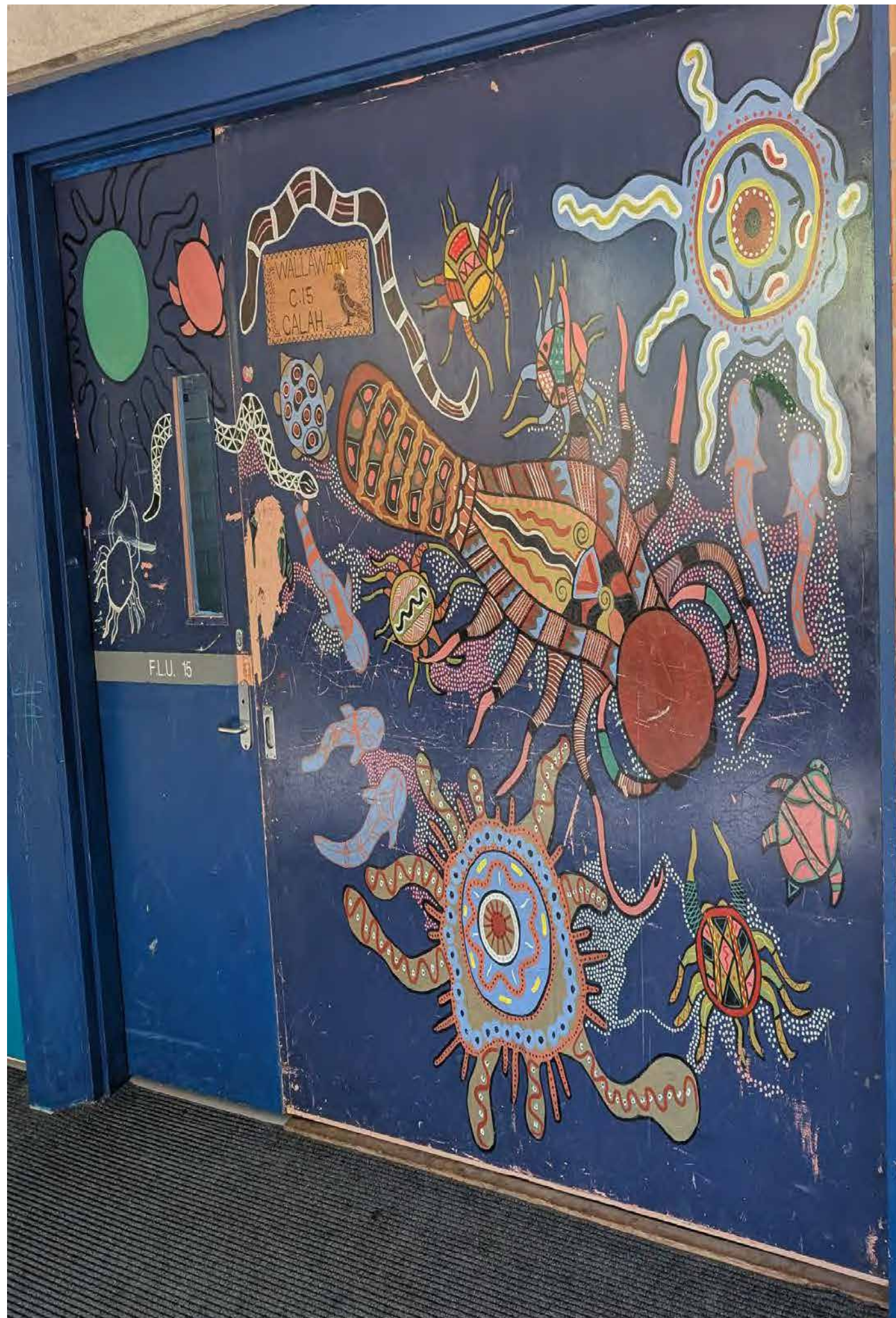
VII

Cecily Wellington-Carpenter¹² was also a resident artist at Shoalhaven High School. Cecily made a major contribution to South Coast arts and culture. Her murals can be found in the buildings of several Aboriginal organisations in Nowra. She won the National NAIDOC Art prize in 2000.

Cecily worked with students to create elaborate murals showing sea creatures all with distinctive x ray patterns. The detail of different saltwater animals, such as the lobster outside room C15, is part of Cecily's signature style. The sea creatures float across the space giving an illusion of undersea life. Many other animals were created by Cecily and students and appear on ballustrades, eves and hall ways throughout the school.



¹² Aunty Cecily Wellington-Carpenter passed away in late 2020. She was a renowned artist with over 35 years' experience. She was acknowledged at the highest levels, having won a National NAIDOC Art Prize in 2000. Aunty Cecily's passion was always to tell a story, use vibrant colours and saltwater themes. She has left a significant artist's mark in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions with many of her pieces featured on public buildings, in publications and at the South Coast Aboriginal Medical Service. Her family are proud to continue to acknowledge and honour Aunty Cecily's distinguished artwork and we are honoured to be able to do so on this website.



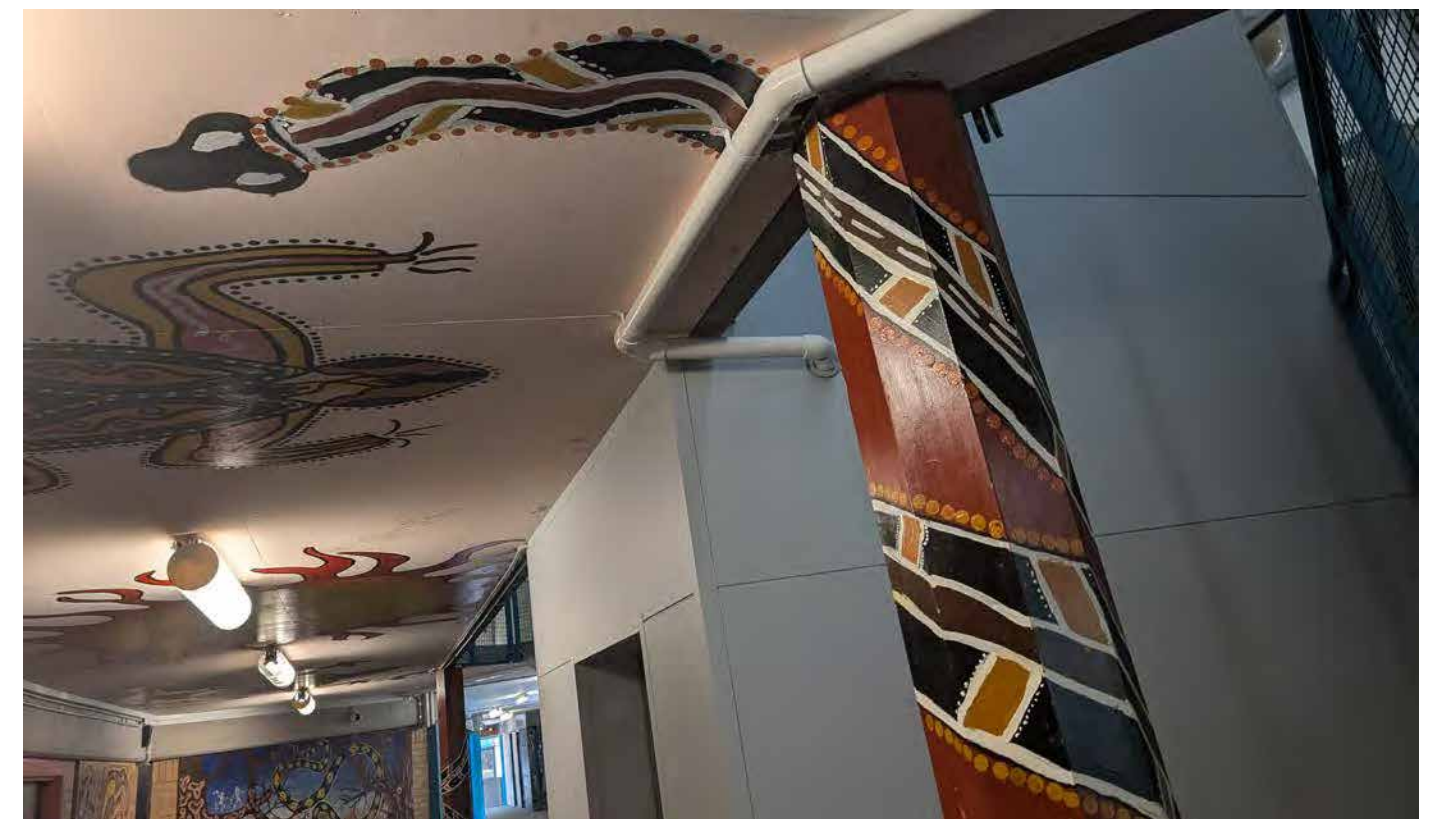
VII

Reggie Ryan was an accomplished local artist who curated several significant murals and artworks at Shoalhaven High School. Reggie went through Bomaderry Childrens Home as a young boy and his work is much appreciated for its references to local flora and fauna. There are also deep meanings in the art that refer back to Bomaderry and his experiences there.

Reggie completed a significant mural in C Block that features a goanna and a snake and associated plants and trees. The recurring images of snakes and goannas lead to questions about their significance in local culture.

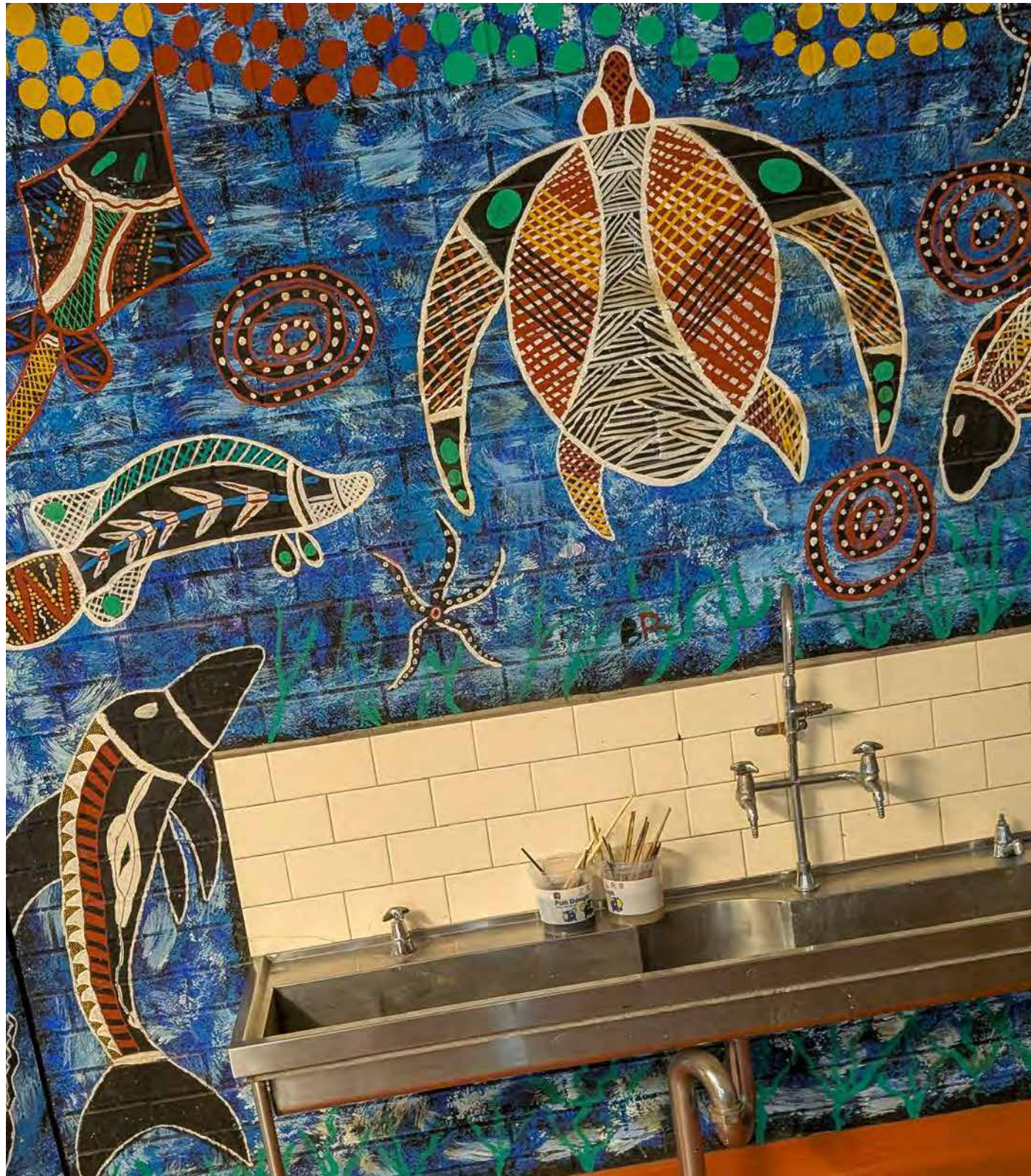
Another of Reggie's works centres on a billabong surrounded by trees and animals. It may well be inspired by Bomaderry creek and what is now the wildlife reserve (in which the mural noted above is located). This was a favourite playground. The mural depicts animals drinking at the water hole and several other figures watch and dance. Symbols of far distant communities may represent the children who were taken and came to Bomaderry.

Reggie also completed artworks on several of the pillars in C Block. His pythons scale upwards to the ceilings above.

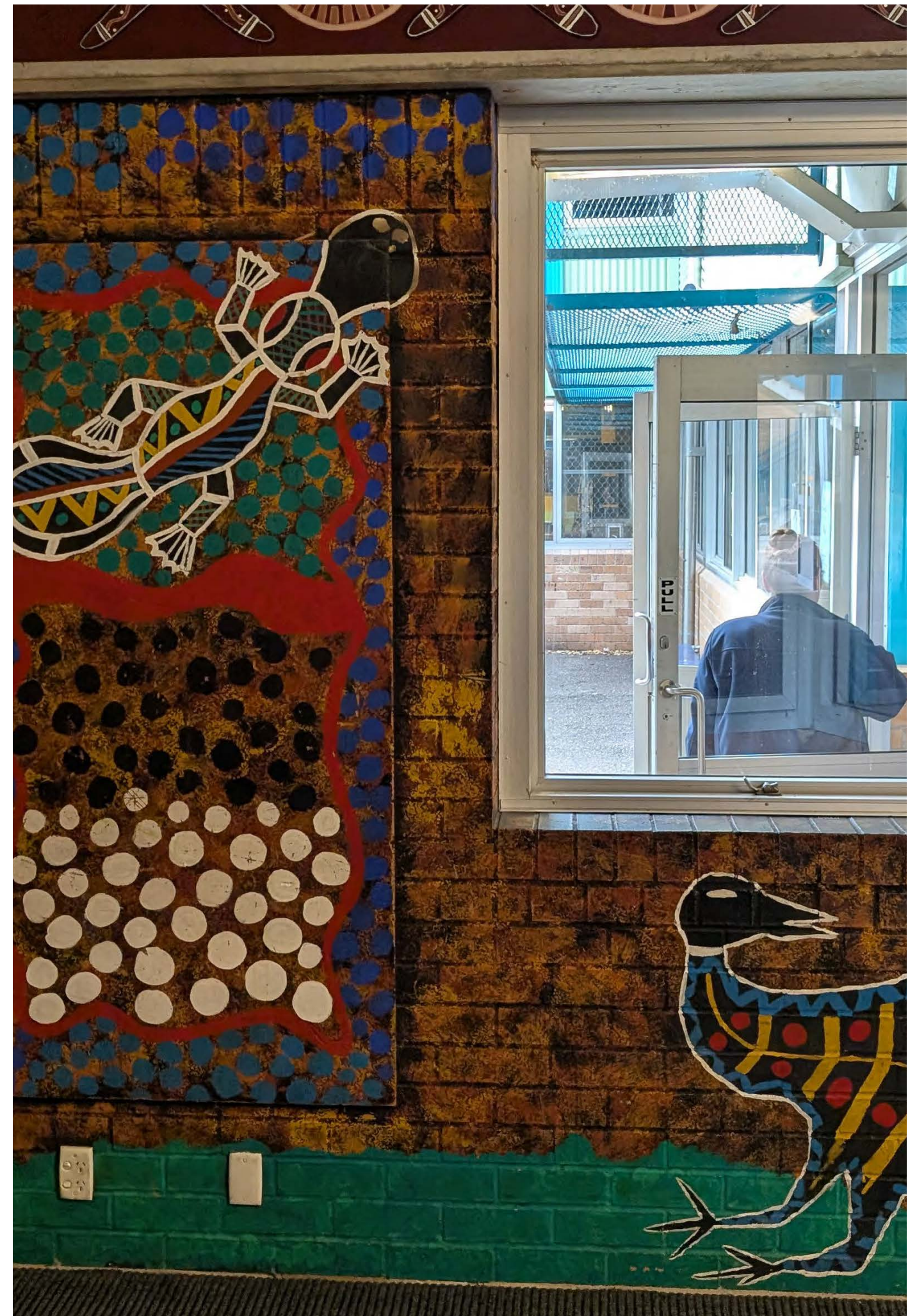




Steven Jabaljarri Sutton, a talented artist born in Darwin, with deep roots in the Northern Territory and East Kimberley¹³ was also resident at Shoalhaven High and also curated a series of murals in C Block. Steve encouraged students to contribute to artworks, painting platypus nests, emus and snakes.



¹³ Steven discovered his love for art at just 16 years old, eventually moving to Kununurra to hone his craft. He then returned to Tenant Creek, drawn back by the strong ties of family. Steve's art is a unique blend of two traditional painting styles. The intricate crosshatching reflects his connection to his Grandmother's country near the Roper River, while the 'dot' style, inherited from his Jawoyn heritage, is a hallmark of desert painting.



VIII

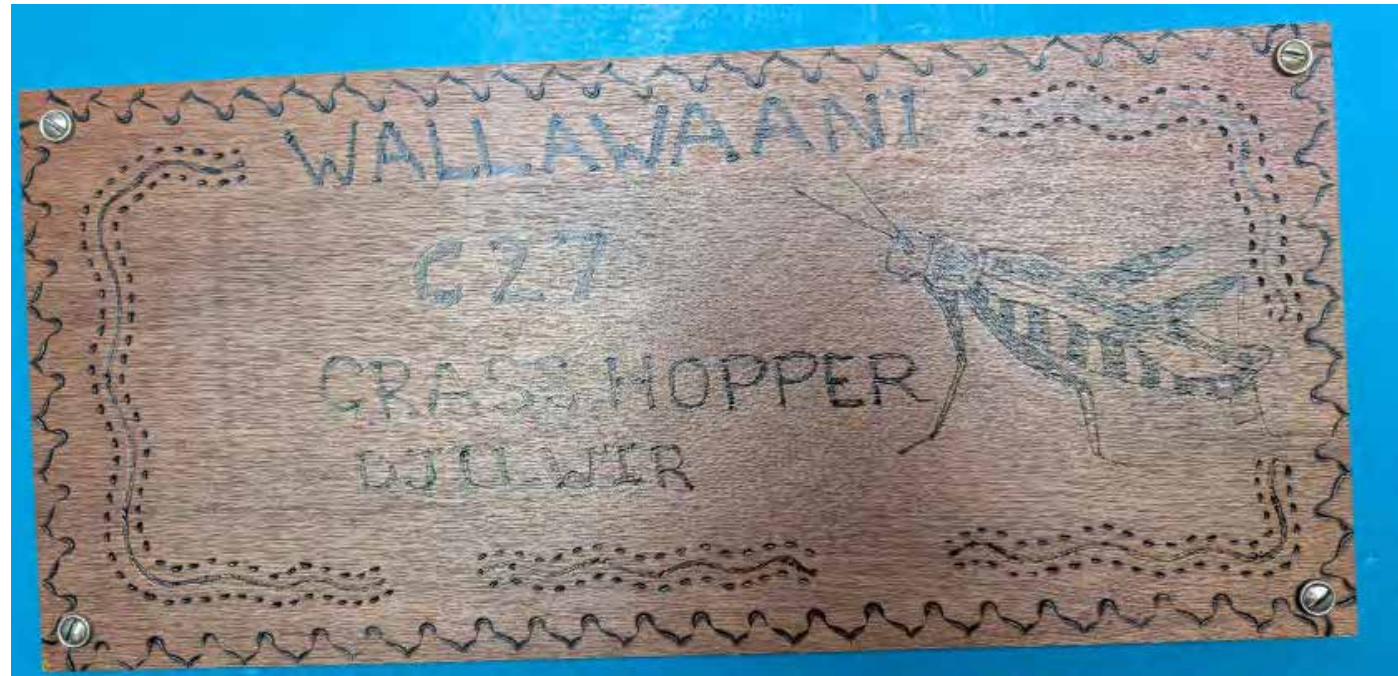
In 2025 Kerry Williams carries on the traditions of the painters who have worked at Shoalhaven High over the past 40 plus years. Kerry has painted a number of areas within the school and one of her contributions is carved room plates for each of the Shoalhaven High School classrooms and general spaces.

Each room in the school now has the word Wallawaani (Welcome) and an Aboriginal name and story.

With Mel Brennan's special education class, Kerry painted a mural on the wall of the Aboriginal Education Officers and Narla room in C Block. The mural is a backdrop to the day to day activities of the school.

In Kerry's paintings hand prints are a motif of much Nowra art following the heritage of the "Devils Hands" which were found in caves above the Shoalhaven River. Hands are signatures of people, different stages of life and epochs past and present.

The doors of the Nahla Aboriginal Education Officers Room are a familiar place for Aboriginal students. Again hands feature in the artwork denoting the participation, entrance and exit of students, teachers and Aboriginal educators and artists in the school. This artwork is incomplete, over time different dimensions of the artwork unfold and change.





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