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Ochre Woman – artist Heidi Lee Warta's portraits of Indigenous women of the Northern Beaches

By **Alec Smart** June 30, 2022



Artist Heidi Lee Warta in her Collaroy studio. Photo: Alec Smart

Artist Heidi Lee Warta is hosting *Ochre Woman*, an exhibition of painted portraits of Indigenous women, at [Curl Curl Creative Space](#), Abbot Rd, North Curl Curl, from Friday 1 July to Sunday 10 July 2022.

Coinciding with [NAIDOC](#) Week and the annual Gai-Mariagal [Indigenous festival](#), the exhibition has twice been postponed due to the worldwide coronavirus pandemic.

"This exhibition has a collection of ten portraits of local Aboriginal women and also my

Sponsors



“This exhibition has a collection of ten portraits of local Aboriginal women and also my collection of eco-dyed scarves,” Heidi revealed.

The [exhibition](#) features paintings of First Nations women culturally associated with the Northern Beaches, and is endorsed by the Gunyadu First Nations Women’s Aboriginal Corporation and supported by the Gai-mariagal Group.

Heidi’s portraits are large, vibrant and engaging, resembling photographs in their attention to detail. According to the exhibition description, “through the use of charcoal, pastel and ochre, portrait drawings are applied to large eco-dye fabrics, which is an expression of the artist’s expression of love and connection to the original culture of this land.

“Using natural mediums within modern art techniques, this exhibition highlights the life and achievements in celebration of these amazing First Nations women.”

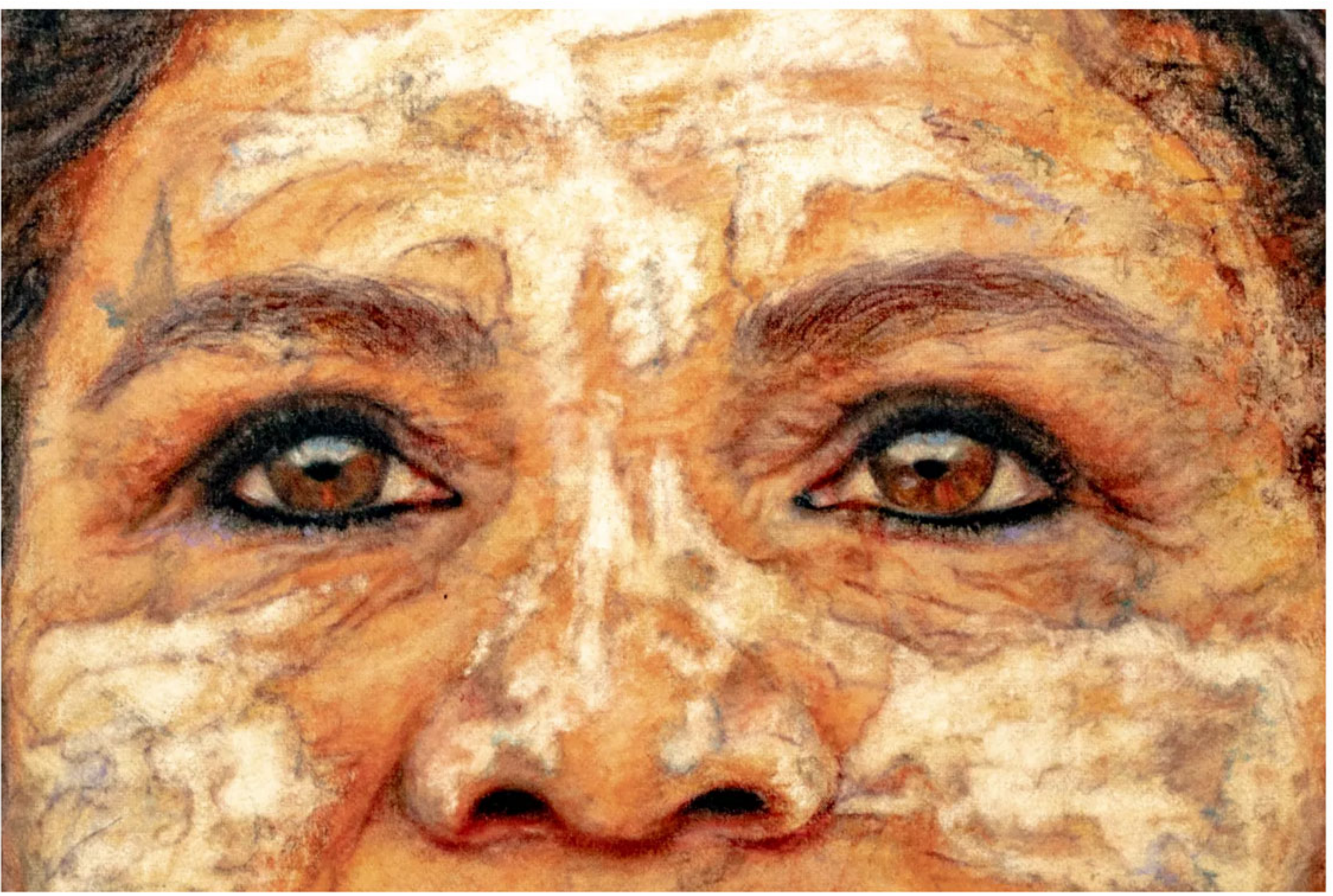
Heidi, who grew up on Sydney’s Northern Beaches, is a versatile and prolific artist who integrates experimental and traditional techniques. Often following themes (her website reveals goddesses, landscapes and vividly coloured wildlife), she works in a range of mediums, including acrylics, oils and watercolours, as well as sculptures and mixed media.

Her 3D pieces typically utilise natural materials that she has foraged from seashores and forests, such as leaves, flowers, branches, clay, shells and driftwood. Heidi’s fabrics are stained with tints derived from native flora, including leaves and plants she gathers on her walks.

“I deeply enjoy the entire eco-dying process from start to finish,” Heidi declared. “I think the eco-dying has been a huge catalyst in helping me to connect to country and opening my eyes to the beauty around me. Using plants that are blooming during their season I learning about the six seasons of Aboriginal culture during my creative process.”

Living on the Northern Beaches has significantly influenced her creativity because coastal themes weave through many of her artworks.

“I love the ocean and coast so much,” she confirmed, “and I could honestly say that I cannot live far from the ocean. I am deeply connected to the water and I see this as something like a ‘need’ for me. I love to go to the local beaches. The natural features of the coastline have been a great source of inspiration, which I’ve been drawn to when immersed in my artworks.”



An enlarged section of one of Heidi's portraits appearing in the Ochre Woman exhibition. Photo: Alec Smart

Portable conversation starters

Heidi also works with resins – familiar to surfboard makers – combining them with acrylics and poured onto marine plyboard to create large, semi-abstract pieces. “I totally enjoy the resin art process and how the colours move and often I don’t end up with what I was planning,” she explained. “Often this process is demanding but exciting, due to the small amount of time I have to work with the piece before the resin sets.”

Because the resin, when set, is transparent, items can be preserved within and viewed from all angles. Taking this to a new level, Heidi crafts bangles comprising found objects; unique, portable art pieces worn on the wrist that are guaranteed conversation starters.

“I have a stash of bits and bobs in my studio,” she revealed, which she arranges in the moulds before adding the liquid resin. “I have been collecting small, natural objects over the years along my walks and adventures... When I make a resin bangle, what I incorporate is either a process of elimination or at other times the pieces fit straight away as the ideas come to mind effortlessly.”

The *Ochre Woman* exhibition coincides with the annual Gai-mariagal Festival, a “[celebration](#) of the oldest living culture on the planet,” which features talks, walks and exhibitions on Indigenous themes, which began on Sorry Day, 26 May and runs to the end of NAIDOC Week, the second week in July each year.

The Gai-mariagal (aka Cammeraigal – from where we get the suburb named Cammeray) were one of 29 Dharug-speaking clans living in the Sydney region when European

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The Gai-mariagal (aka Cammeraigal – from where we get the suburb named Cammeray) were one of 29 Dharug-speaking clans living in the Sydney region when European colonists arrived in 1788. They occupied the north shore of Sydney Harbour, from east of the Lane Cove River (Turranburra), where they overlapped with the Wallumedegal clans, and around to Manly Cove (Kayeemay, where the Kayeemaygal clan resided).

The Cammeraigal also ranged northwards through present-day North Sydney and Willoughby, where they overlapped with the Durramurragal clans, and around Middle Harbour/Warringah and down to what is now Curl Curl/Dee Why, where they overlapped with the Garigal peoples of the Upper Northern Beaches.

“I’ve been drawn to Aboriginal culture and I’ve found it hard to find information about this within the Northern Beaches region and to connect with First Nations people who are living here,” Heidi said. “I want to make a difference in my own small way by capturing the beauty and strength of these amazing women in these portraits.

“This event is about sharing, healing and connecting through a series of presentations and workshops that some of these women will offer as part of the exhibition.”

***Ochre Woman* – accompanying workshops:**