

Sydney Airport to house 28 First Nations flags as part of a new public art installation

ABC Arts / By Dee Jefferson

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The artwork United Neytions will represent the original Aboriginal nations. (Supplied: MCA)

In 1788, the First Fleet sailed into Botany Bay and proceeded to settle lands that the Bidjigal people had inhabited for more than 40,000 years.

From 2018, international visitors to the area — specifically, the T1 International terminal of Sydney Airport — will be greeted by 28 flags representing the original Aboriginal nations, as imagined by Kamilaroi artist Archie Moore.

Moore's work United Neytions will hang in the T1 terminal thanks to a partnership between Sydney Airport and the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, who sought applications from artists for a major public art commission to hang within the cavernous 17-metre-high space adjacent to the departure lounges.

It is one of the first things passengers will see after clearing security and before boarding their flights.

Moore's work, adapted from his 2014 artwork featuring 14 flags, was chosen from a shortlist of eight, by a panel chaired by curator Barbara Flynn and including:

- Sydney Airport chief Kerrie Mather
- Greater Sydney Commission chief commissioner Lucy Turnbull AO
- City of Sydney design director Bridget Smyth
- Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) Australia director curatorial and digital Blair French.



Sydney Airport chief Kerrie Mather, artist Archie Moore and MCA director Elizabeth Ann Macgregor at T1 International Terminal.
(Supplied: MCA)

United Neytions previously hung in the foyer of Sydney's Carriageworks as part of The National 2017: New Australian Art.

For T1, the work will be scaled up to fit the larger space.

Speaking at the announcement for the project, singer-songwriter and Bidjigal elder Vic Simms shared his hopes for Moore's artwork.

"Everybody who sees it will admire it and take into their hearts and their minds that there are Aboriginal people here, and that first and foremost this is Aboriginal land — Bidjigal land," he said.

Ms Mather said she was excited to "highlight an iconic work of an Australian artist to a wide international audience".

"Archie's United Neytions is not only a stunning artwork, but it tells a wonderful story about the diversity of our community and the Aboriginal experience."

Approximately 15 million visitors pass through T1 every year — a fact not lost on MCA director Elizabeth Ann Macgregor OBE, who notes that the museum receives around 1 million visitors every year.

"To commission a public work that is permanent is a departure for us," she said.

"We want to extend outside the museum and reach audiences who perhaps have never been ... before.

"Also, the MCA is really about artists. We want to support them, give them more attention."

Artist interested in inaccuracies of earlier map

Moore originally developed the installation for the 2014 exhibition *Courting Blakness* at the University of Queensland.

That iteration featured just 14 flags, based a map created by anthropologist RH Mathews in 1900.

Mathews was a self-taught anthropologist and non-Indigenous and his map contained many inaccuracies.

Moore:

"I was interested in that, and how thorough his research was, and whether it was influenced by notions of racial superiority, and how much care he took.

"For example, for one of the nations in Western Australia, he couldn't find the local name for it so he just named it after a sheep station in the area."

"I like that Mathews called these communities nations, but the way he went about it was kind of careless, and not authentic."



'Kamilaroi Neytion' flag by Archie Moore. (Supplied: The Commercial, Sydney)

Moore's designs for the flags were inspired by local designs for each nation.

"I superimposed his map over the contemporary Indigenous map, and saw what groups of people were inside the boundaries he drew, and researched their designs, body art, dendroglyphs and unique geographic features," he said.

"I was trying to find unique things for each group.

"They're not real flags. They're artworks. It's exploring notions of authenticity and knowledge, and who has access to knowledge."

This layer of irony will be lost on passersby who are not aware of the provenance of the work or the intention of the artist.

"You can never judge the reception of a work of art. It's not didactic. It's open to interpretation," Ms Macgregor said.

"But we're hoping [is that] people will be curious, and we'll make sure there is information available. At the end of the day, people will enjoy things on different levels."