

# JULIE DOWLING



**BULGURR MABARN (BUSH MEDICINE/MAGIC)**

# NIAGARA

25 MAR - 18 APR 2026

## **Bulgurr Mabarn (Bush Medicine/Magic)**

*Bulgurr Mabarn—bush medicine*—is a call to remember that healing is a collective act. It is a practice shaped by love, by resistance, and by the deep knowledge that survival is not enough; our communities deserve to flourish. In these works, Julie Dowling turns toward the wounds created by colonisation, not to reopen them, but to show how Aboriginal people continue to create spaces of care, connection, and cultural strength in the face of ongoing domination.

Dowling's paintings speak to the truth that healing cannot happen without confronting the systems that harm us. She paints with a clarity that refuses sentimentality. Instead, she offers a vision of love as an active force—love that protects children, love that honours Country, love that insists on justice. Her work reminds us that to love Aboriginal people is to fight for their right to live free from violence, erasure, and state control. In *Wadha wagu (looking for home)*, Dowling reveals the emotional and political reality of Aboriginal child removal. The siblings she paints are held in a system that fractures families and disrupts cultural belonging. Their waiting is not passive; it is a testament to endurance. This painting asks us to understand that the struggle for our children is a struggle for the future of our communities. It is an insistence that love—not bureaucracy—must guide the care of Aboriginal children.

*Mardubaya dhadhadya (growing up strong)* confronts the criminalisation of Aboriginal childhood. In Western Australia, children as young as ten are treated as though they are beyond tenderness, beyond innocence. Dowling refuses this lie. She paints the truth of a child who deserves protection, not punishment. Her work challenges the structures that deny Black children their right to childhood, exposing how racism distorts the way society sees them. She calls us to imagine a world where Aboriginal children are nurtured, not policed; where they grow in the safety of community, not behind bars.

In *Dhirandi djooditj murni*, Dowling turns toward the women who care for Country with a devotion that predates the nation-state by tens of thousands of years. The Aboriginal woman ranger stands with the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo and the Western Quoll—endangered beings whose survival is tied to the survival of culture itself. This painting honours the labour of care, the work of tending to land and kin, the quiet power of women who hold knowledge that sustains life. It reminds us that healing Country is inseparable from healing ourselves.

Together, these works form a vision of *balgurr mabarn* as both medicine and movement. They teach us that healing is not a retreat from struggle but a way of engaging it with integrity and love. Dowling's paintings ask us to witness the truth of Aboriginal experience and to recognise that liberation begins with the courage to see clearly. This exhibition invites us into a space where art becomes a site of transformation. It asks us to imagine a world where children are cherished, where Country is respected, where communities thrive, and where love is understood as a radical, necessary force. In the spirit of *balgurr mabarn*, these works offer not only critique but possibility—the possibility of a future shaped by justice, connection, and collective healing.

**Dr Carol Dowling (twin sister to the Artist)**  
Associate Professor | Centre for Aboriginal Studies, Curtin University



This painting is my tribute to a Badimia Murni madya, a woman lore holder whose authority comes from the oldest laws on this continent. I've painted her holding gurgurdang, our wildflowers, because they speak to her relationship with Country—living reminders of who she is and where she stands.

She wears the stiff, restrictive clothing of the Victorian era—garments forced onto our women as part of the colonial project to control, discipline, and reshape us. These clothes were never hers by choice. They were the daily uniform of survival under a system that demanded obedience while denying our humanity.

Over those imposed garments, she pulls on her marlu mindyu, our kangaroo cloak. It sits above the colonial fabric deliberately, asserting the primacy of her culture over anything the colony tried to place upon her. The cloak is not just warmth or comfort; it is a declaration. It reminds us that even when our ancestors were made to perform the roles demanded by their colonisers, their true identity— their lore, their sovereignty— remained intact beneath and ultimately above it.

I painted her knowing that what she holds will continue forward to seven generations ahead. She stands here not as a relic of the past, but as a reminder of our ongoing sovereignty. Our women have always been the keepers of continuity, and no amount of colonial pressure has ever broken that.

1. *Murni Madya (Woman Lore Holder)*, 2026  
acrylic, red ochre on canvas  
119.5 x 88.5cm



2. *Wadha Wagu (Looking For Home)*, 2026  
acrylic, red ochre on canvas  
120 x 89cm

My family has recently ended twenty-two years as registered foster carers. In 2008, my sister Carol, our mother Ronnie, and I made the decision to open our home and our hearts as an Aboriginal placement. Within three weeks of registering, our first foster son arrived—a deeply traumatised 14-month-old baby who needed safety, stability, and love. Four years later, we were blessed with his younger brother, placed with us at seven months old. Our lives changed forever. Both boys are now adults, and they will always be part of our family.

Western Australia continues to hold the highest rate of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care in the nation. Although our people make up only 5% of the state’s population, our children account for 60% of all foster placements. Of these, one-third experience more than ten placements in their short lives. The crisis is concentrated in suburbs like Armadale and Cannington, where the rates of removal are the highest in the state. This painting shows siblings waiting for another placement. There is no guarantee that they will be placed together and this is a systemic injustice affecting our community’s future – its children.

There is no guarantee that our children will be raised in culture. Under relentless surveillance, and in the face of systemic racism directed at Aboriginal mothers and families, child removal has become a national injustice—one that now dwarfs the numbers taken during the Stolen Generations between 1905 and 1963 in WA. This is not history repeating itself; this is history continuing.

This painting shows siblings waiting for yet another placement. There is no certainty they will be kept together. That uncertainty—manufactured by policy, bureaucracy, and prejudice—is a profound injustice that fractures our community’s future. These children deserve stability, kinship, and culture. They deserve to grow up knowing who they are and where they belong.

*Wadha Wagu* speaks to every child searching for home, and to every family fighting to keep them close.



In Western Australia, the age of criminal responsibility is just ten years old—one of the youngest thresholds in the world. This law overwhelmingly targets First Nations children, who are policed, charged, and incarcerated at rates that expose the deep racial bias embedded in the state’s justice system.

In the 1990s, Perth’s public conversation about Aboriginal children was poisoned by the racist shock-jock Howard Sattler. After a series of high-speed police pursuits involving Aboriginal youth, five Noongar boys were killed when police failed to break off a chase. Sattler responded on his 6PR talk-back program with the words “good riddance to bad rubbish,” and used his platform to push for a “three strikes” policy inside juvenile detention. His rhetoric fuelled right-wing rallies where some supporters held hangman’s nooses in public view. The result was a dramatic rise in the incarceration of Aboriginal children—many charged for acts linked directly to poverty and systemic neglect.

Even magistrates have spoken out in recent years, describing children being jailed for stealing food on their third strike. Amnesty International states that imprisonment must be a last resort for children, yet in Western Australia it has become routine. Banksia Hill Detention Centre is now chronically overcrowded. Children protest their treatment, only to be transferred into Section 18 units within Casuarina Prison—an adult maximum-security facility.

Last year, an Aboriginal child died by suicide in these cells. Despite this tragedy, little has changed. A major assessment by the Telethon Kids Institute found that 89% of children in Banksia Hill live with severe cognitive impairments, including Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders. These are children who need care, support, and therapeutic intervention—not punishment.

This painting centres the truth that is too often denied: a ten-year-old Aboriginal child is still tender, still small, still learning their place in the world. Yet our children are routinely treated as if they are older, harder, and more dangerous than they are. This distortion—rooted in racism—strips them of innocence and exposes them to harm.

*Mardubaya Dhadhadya* insists on seeing our children as they truly are. It calls for an end to the criminalisation of childhood and demands that Western Australia raise the age of criminal responsibility to fourteen, in line with international standards. Our children deserve to grow up strong, surrounded by love, culture, and community—not locked behind bars.

3. *Mardubaya Dhadhadya (Growing Up Strong)*, 2026  
acrylic, red ochre on canvas  
120 x 89cm



4. *Dyubamarda (Small Child)*, 2026  
acrylic, red ochre on canvas  
119.5 x 89cm

This portrait of a young Aboriginal mother holding her infant in a brightly coloured sarong was completed during a moment of profound grief and alarm. As I worked, a homemade bomb was thrown into a peaceful Invasion Day protest—an event led, as always, by First Nations families and the non-Aboriginal allies who stand with us. The gathering was a space for truth-telling, for naming what is happening to our communities. Instead, it became another reminder of how unsafe our lives can be.

Will we be able to celebrate NAIDOC Week here in Boorloo? Will our families be safe in public spaces? Will the next bomb or “device” work as intended? These are not abstract fears. Racism is lethal.

For days, mainstream media and political leaders remained silent. Only social media reacted with urgency, as if the wild, wild colonial frontier had suddenly revealed itself again. Here in Western Australia, this violence sits within a broader and devastating truth: our state has the highest rate of incarceration of First Nations people in the world, and the highest rates of our children being removed into out-of-home care in the country.

This painting asks viewers to recognise the humanity of this mother and child, and by extension, the humanity of all our families. We all live here. Acknowledge our shared responsibility to ensure that every child—every dyubamarda—can grow up safe, loved, and free.



This painting honours the growing number of Aboriginal rangers who continue the oldest land management practices on Earth. At the centre stands a Badimia woman ranger, carrying the authority of more than 65,000 years of custodianship. She represents the strength and knowledge of our people who work every day to protect Country despite the pressures of climate change, land degradation, and ongoing colonial land use.

Perched on her shoulder is a female dhirandi, the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo—rare, vulnerable, and expected by many scientists to face extinction within the next fifty years if current conditions continue. Beside her is the djooditj, the Western Quoll, an endangered marsupial whose survival depends on the health of Country and the continuation of cultural land practices.

These animals are not symbols; they are kin. Their presence speaks to the deep relational responsibilities between Aboriginal people and the living world. When our rangers care for Country, they are caring for family—winged, furred, rooted, and human.

Through land use agreements and other mechanisms hard-won by our communities, Aboriginal rangers are able to work on Country, restoring practices that were never lost, only interrupted. Fire management, species protection, cultural mapping, and the renewal of sacred sites all form part of this ongoing custodianship.

5. *Dhirandi Djooditj Murni (Red Tailed Black Cockatoo, Western Quall with Badimiya Woman)*, 2026  
acrylic, red ochre on canvas  
119 x 89cm



There has always been immense gender diversity in First Nations communities across this continent. Our families have never fitted neatly into the rigid boxes imposed by colonial systems. I come from a long line of people who live proudly across the full spectrum of the rainbow, and I honour them.

This painting shows a younger brother embracing his older sibling—his Yigu, his older sister in Badimia language. Their bond is an act of love, but it is also an act of defiance. In a world that still tries to police our bodies, our identities, and our relationships, they choose each other with tenderness and truth.

We should celebrate people like this—strong, beautiful human beings who walk through life guided by their inner spirit rather than by the narrow expectations forced upon them. Their courage exposes the lie of colonial gender norms. Their existence is a reminder that acceptance is not a modern invention; it is an ancient practice of our peoples.

This painting is about love as sovereignty. Love as resistance. Love as the oldest form of freedom we have.



This painting honours the rare and sacred walarda (native sandalwood trees) of Badimia country in the central west of Western Australia. Once abundant, these trees are now endangered—threatened by decades of ecological damage, overharvesting, and land clearing. Their decline is not just environmental; it is deeply cultural. For Badimia people, the absence of walarda is felt in the land itself. These trees are intimately connected to water sources in our semi-arid landscape. Without them, the balance of Country is disturbed. The drying of waterholes is not just a climate issue—it is a spiritual and ancestral one.

In this work, I depict a family of five—mum, dad, and three children—returning to Country. For the younger children, this is their first time on barna (ancestral land). Their bodies carry symbols of gabi dhaa (waterholes), representing both physical and spiritual nourishment. Behind them stand the copper-coloured trunks of a sandalwood grove, found on Ninghan Station along the Great Northern Highway, leading toward my ancestral home.

This painting is a story of reconnection. It speaks to the resilience of Badimia families and the urgent need to protect what remains. The walarda trees are more than botanical—they are guardians of water, memory, and life. Through this work, I call attention to the fragility of our ecosystems and the strength of our cultural ties. We return not just to land, but to knowledge, to healing, and to truth.



8. *Warlandi (Rainbow)*, 2025  
acrylic, red ochre and plastic on canvas  
119.5 x 88.5cm

This painting honours the quiet but powerful resistance of Aboriginal families who reclaimed their right to live on their ancestral lands during the 1960s—a time when colonial systems were still trying to erase us. It speaks to the strength of our people who refused to be confined to missions, reserves, or policies of assimilation, and instead chose to return to Country, to culture, and to each other.

The family in this work—a mother, father, and young son—stand proudly on their sacred land. They are healthy, strong, and unbroken. The father holds his son’s hand with tenderness and purpose, carrying a hand woven bag over his shoulder—a symbol of cultural knowledge and survival. The band around his head marks him as a man who has been through lore, carrying the responsibilities of ceremony and ancestral law that colonial systems tried to suppress.

The mother wears a white dress, not to reflect colonial ideals of purity, but to reclaim it—purity of spirit, of connection to Country, and of cultural integrity. Their direct gaze challenges the viewer: we are still here, still sovereign, and still connected to our lands despite generations of attempted dispossession.

The blue sky is scattered with flower-shaped glass beads, symbolic of the 1960s—a time of blossoming resistance and renewal. The trees beside them are not just part of the landscape; they are kin, witnesses to survival and resurgence.

This painting is a declaration: our return to Country was never just about geography. It was about reclaiming what was always ours—our land, our law, our families, and our future.



9. *Wilaya (Moon)*, 2025  
acrylic, red ochre, metal, pearl shell, glass and plastic on canvas  
119.5 x 88.5cm

As a Badimia artist, I speak from a legacy shaped by survival, resistance, and truth-telling. Around the 1870s, when Europeans first arrived on Badimia country, western clothing became the most valuable item a person could possess—not for comfort or status, but as a form of protection. If you were seen living traditionally, like our ancestors before contact, you risked being shot or poisoned on sight. Western clothing marked you as enslaved or ‘owned’ by one of the many squatters who had taken our land.

My apical ancestor, Melbin, wore western clothing—just like the nyarlu (woman) I’ve painted here. My great-great-grandmother was named after the town of Melbourne by her captor, who took her to England in the 1880s as a colonial trophy. These acts were not isolated. Across the continent, Aboriginal people were subjected to systems of unpaid labour, forced servitude, and domestic slavery—often under the guise of ‘protection’ or ‘assimilation’. This history is rarely acknowledged in the national narrative, yet it shaped generations of our families.

In Yamatji country, massacres were widespread but never documented. No one was ever charged. No one was ever convicted. The power of white squatters was vast and unchecked.

Despite this, the night sky continues to guide us. For Badimia people, the moon is a sacred calendar and spiritual compass. Western clothing, by contrast, is a mask—one that distances us from our deep connection to nature, to Country, and to the cosmos.

In this work, I’ve used found objects to represent the detritus of western capitalism and mass production. These fragments speak to the ongoing legacy of colonisation—what it discards, what it consumes, and what it tries to erase. Through art, I reclaim these materials and stories. I honour my ancestors. I make visible what was meant to be forgotten.



This portrait depicts my grandmother, Mollie, dressed in the blue suit she wore during the Second World War—a uniform of respectability, stitched not for pride but for survival. She wore it to be seen as acceptable in a society that demanded Aboriginal women erase themselves to be tolerated. It was assimilation by tailoring.

Surrounding her are symbols that feign the natural: bees, agate stones, roses, and wildflowers. But these are not drawn from country—they are stylised, synthetic, manufactured. Their prettiness is brittle. They evoke the decorative clutter of suburban artifice, not the organic truth of land. They speak to the dislocation of a Badimia woman, severed from her ancestral ground in the central west and re-rooted in a culture that prized mimicry over authenticity.

Above her, the golden sky blooms with lace chrysanthemums—ornate, intricate, and wholly unnatural. They hover like colonial ghosts, floral filigree masquerading as reverence. But this is not reverence. It is a visual taxonomy of displacement.

This painting is not nostalgic. It is forensic. It examines the aesthetic machinery of assimilation and the quiet violence of imposed civility. Mollie's gaze is not passive—it is diagnostic. She sees the performance, the cost, and the lie.

And so must we.

10. *Buyun Gami (Blue Nana)*, 2025  
acrylic, red ochre and mixed media on canvas  
119 x 88.5cm



This painting is a memory held in the heat of a Perth summer—1970, during the Royal Show. The kind of heat that clings to skin and settles into the folds of clothes. My mother, Ronnie, stands on the left. She was the eldest sister, raising me and my twin Carol on her own, with strength stitched into every gesture. Liz, the youngest, stands beside her, smiling into the lens of a street photographer who stopped them mid-step. That moment was never meant to be grand. It was just a pause in the day, a breath between show rides and dust.

Ronnie wore her best—simple, practical, dignified. Liz carried a tote with a green smiley face, bright against the sun-bleached ground. Behind them, the world swirled in colour: oranges, greens, reds, yellows. Not the colours of country, but the colours of spectacle. The kind that distracts and dazzles, but never quite settles.

Scattered through the painting are black pearl shell buttons and plastic trinkets—small things, ordinary things. But they carry weight. The buttons speak of tradition, of care passed down through hands. The trinkets, cheap and cheerful, remind us of what was offered in place of belonging

11. *Dyambadya (Running Together)*, 2025  
acrylic, red ochre and mixed media on canvas  
119 x 89cm



12. *Nyiya Mudu (This Mob)*, 2025  
acrylic, red ochre and mixed media on canvas  
120 x 89cm

This painting presents a family quartet: my mother Ronnie on the left, my grandmother on the right, and in front, my twin sister Carol and me—Carol on the left, myself on the right. We are dressed identically, as twins often are, not for novelty but for cohesion. The dresses were handmade by our mother, stitched with care and matched by her own top. It was not fashion—it was pride, resourcefulness, and love rendered in fabric.

We were often looked at. Twins in public drew attention, and the gaze was always kind, but not always wanted. There's a difference between admiration and intrusion, and as children, we felt it. The smiles from strangers were gentle, but they reminded us that we were being watched. We stood still, posed, polite—aware of ourselves as image.

Behind us, the background is alive with meaning. The symbols are not decorative—they are cartographic. Goanna tracks, emu footprints, the marks of cultural burning, and stylised flowers embedded with agate stones and pearls. These are not embellishments. They are records of movement, survival, and cultural continuity. They speak to a deeper geography than the one we stood on.

My grandmother, dressed in white shoes and carrying a white handbag, was always precise in her presentation. Her appearance was a kind of armour—an assertion of dignity in a world that measured worth by polish. She understood the power of being well-dressed, and she wielded it with quiet authority.

This painting is not sentimental. It is composed. It examines the choreography of family, the tension between being seen and being known, and the quiet strength of women who held their ground with grace and intention.



13. *Bulidya (These Two)*, 2025  
acrylic, red ochre and mixed media on canvas  
89 x 119.5cm

This painting captures a moment at the Perth Zoo in the early 1970s. Two children stand side by side, dressed in matching strawberry shortcake dresses sewn by their mother, Ronnie—handmade garments with daisies stitched at the hem, a quiet act of care in a world that rarely offered it. The girls hold their Christmas dolls, posed near the gibbons enclosure, where the animals swung freely on ropes strung between palm trees. The enclosure was an island, and in many ways, so were we.

I am on the left. Carol is on the right. We were twins, and in public, that made us a spectacle. People stared. They commented. They pointed. And while Carol smiled through it, I often felt the weight of those gazes—embarrassed, exposed, uncertain of what made us so different. The attention was never neutral. It was a kind of social theatre, and we were cast without consent.

The background is not decorative. It's symbolic. The circular forms behind us represent waterholes—sites of gathering, memory, and cultural continuity. They stand in contrast to the artificial setting of the zoo, where nature is curated and performance is expected. The iconography is deliberate: it speaks to the tension between being observed and being understood.

This painting is not nostalgic. It is diagnostic. It examines the way visibility can be both a gift and a burden, especially for Aboriginal children in a society that treats difference as novelty. It is a portrait of quiet resistance, stitched into fabric, held in posture, and carried in the gaze of a child who knew she was being watched.

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NIAGARA GALLERIES

25 March – 18 April 2026

Exhibition essay by Dr Carol Dowling (twin sister to the Artist)  
Associate Professor | Centre for Aboriginal Studies, Curtin University

Artwork text by Julie Dowling

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Front Cover Image:

2. *Wadha Wagu (Looking For Home)*, 2026, acrylic, red ochre on canvas, 120 x 89cm

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