

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra. And today I'm joined by Deirdre Cannon, Assistant Curator of Australian Art at the National Gallery of Australia to tell us about Australian artist Lindy Lee, and the solo exhibition of her work that is on now at the NGA through the 1st of June 2025. So first, can you tell us what Lindy Lee is known for as an artist?

DC: Right now, Lindy Lee is really known for making big outdoor public sculptures that are accessible on many different levels. She's known for using these materials that can really immerse a viewer in their surfaces. People who live in Adelaide and Sydney and now Canberra might be familiar with their sculptures out the front of cultural institutions that have these kind of stardust patterns of holes all over them. And they are these very kind of enlivened objects that really inhabit this space between object and space. So there's a lot of duality in the sculptures that she's creating right now for the public environment. But it's really important to look back at her career. She wasn't always making works at this scale for outdoor spaces. Lindy as an artist, I think is really exceptional in the way that she uses alchemy in her works. She transforms materials. She transforms the kind of sensations that you associate with materials in a really considered way that is sometimes boggling to the mind. Using these heavy metal materials like steel, like gold even, in the work that's going into the NGA for her exhibition. You can really sense that she wants to engage with materials on a conceptual level, I think, which is really interesting. She wants to honour this kind of understanding and material history that is embedded in the things that she's working with. Another thing that she's also really known for is engaging really head-on with her own biography. She's incredibly generous in that way. She doesn't shy away from the histories that are uncomfortable to think about in the Australian context. She was born during the White Australia Policy, which was instituted in the early 1900s and continued until the 1970s, which basically was designed to limit migration into Australia from non-white countries. So when her parents and her grandparent migrated to Australia, she was part of a context where she didn't have a context kind of thing. She was living between two cultures, as she explains it, and she made art for a very long time that really wanted to pull apart this sense of not feeling like she had a place in the country that she was in. She didn't feel totally Chinese. She didn't feel completely Australian. And so wanting to confront this sensation of feeling in between two states of being is really integral to her work, and I think grounds a lot of the experience that we bring to encountering her public sculptures. The effect that this would have had on Lindy would be one that permeated into her adult life and still underscores a lot of the way that she thinks about making art now.

AT: So you mentioned that, she's used her art to explore her ancestry and Taoism and Buddhism. And that brings us to *Ouroboros*, which is, I would say the main event of the exhibition. So could you tell us about that?

DC: *Ouroboros* was commissioned to celebrate the National Gallery's 40th anniversary. And it's been a multi-year process filled with hundreds of public art experts. But to take you back to the start, in 2020, our director, Nick Mitzевич, invited Lindy to come to the National Gallery, where he took her on a walk around the sculpture garden, where we've got great examples of both international and Australian art, in the outdoor, public context. And he said to Lindy, he wanted her to make something for this milestone in the Gallery's history. And he wanted her to be as ambitious as possible. And so for someone like Lindy who loves working at scale, loves engaging with materials, this was a career-defining opportunity. Lindy, as some of your listeners might know, works very closely with a company called UAP, Urban Art Projects. And this is a company that was started in Australia, now has an international presence, and as their name indicates, they specialise in making public art. It's a really unique business. They incorporate curators, specialist metal workers, AV, VR technicians. It's a multifaceted, multi-tiered creative undertaking. Lindy has been working with UAP for many years. In fact, it was UAP who encouraged her to explore working with certain materials like bronze, and in fact, kind of facilitated her public art career as we know it now. And so the *Ouroboros* has kind of come to life through Lindy's travels to Canberra. She's done many site visits here to get a feeling for the forecourt where the sculpture is now. And as part of the process, she has worked with a Ngannawal elder, Aunty Jude Barlow, as the First Nations advisor for this project. The correlations between Chinese and First Nations spiritualities

and knowledges is something that is really important to Lindy. It's an abiding aspect to her practice that she is engaging with more and more nowadays. So for Lindy to have the opportunity to work with an elder from this community, from Ngambri/Canberra, has really added a new dimension to this work. But back to, I suppose, the physicality. *Ouroboros* is a universal symbol. It's a dragon or a snake that is eating its own tail. So the symbolism is there in itself. It carries meanings of the cyclical nature of life and death, the impermanency of things, the notion that things come back around, that life incorporates both a beginning and an end, and starts all over again at some point that is unknown to all of us. It's made of this highly reflective recycled steel. In fact, it's one of the first sustainable pieces of public art that's been made in Australia. All of the stainless steel has been sourced from places around Australia. So it's of this country, which is really interesting to think about in the way that it inhabits space now, where it is out the front of the gallery. It's very much in keeping with her practice overall that engages with this duality that underwrites human existence, birth and death, and the recycling of life on a cosmic nature.

And cosmos is something that Lindy engages with constantly in her art. Her Buddhist faith teaches us that everything in the cosmos is connected. You can't step out of this connection that we have with each other, with nature, with the continuum of time. There's no way of escaping from it. And so what Lindy has created with this work is an opportunity to engage with the enormity of cosmos, but also to feel like your individual life also accounts for something. It's an immersive experience that takes you from macro to micro in a very elegant and unexpected way. It's the first work of hers that you can physically enter. Up to this point, Lindy has made sculptures for the public space that you can encircle, that you can walk around, that are lit from the inside. And so when nighttime falls on these sculptures, they come to life with a light that kind of emanates out into their physical context and their environment. With *Ouroboros*, she wanted to provide an experience that was generous. You can walk inside *Ouroboros* and experience looking out into the world through these openings that have been placed by hand, which is kind of amazing to think about when you think that there's 45,000 of these hand-cut holes in this circular being. It's a career-defining work for Lindy, and she only wants to make bigger and more expansive things at this point.

AT: When you say enormity and she wants to go even bigger, I don't think that you mentioned, as I understand it, it is around four meters tall and weighs approximately 13 tons. (DC: Correct.) And she wants to go bigger.

DC: Yeah, yeah, why not? This work is very special to her because it incorporates so much of what informs her life and grounds her life. Community is really special to her. A lot of people are involved in the making of her public artworks. I mentioned UAP. The stats of *Ouroboros* are kind of mind-boggling in and of themselves. Over 200 people have had their hands in some way associated with the creation of this work. The skill and artistry has extended to a wide group of people. *Ouroboros'* journey from Brisbane, where it was made at UAP, down to Canberra brings in a whole new set of people to the experience. A company was engaged to transport the *Ouroboros*, which involved various truck drivers, pilots. They were removing like road signs from the side of the road. It was a slow and sometimes precarious journey for it. But thankfully it arrived safely and basically without a hitch. And it's down to the care and expertise of everyone that's been involved, that has made *Ouroboros* what we can see out in the forecourt. It's for people. It's also about people. I think that's really at the crux of what Lindy wanted to communicate with this work.

AT: So I mentioned earlier that the exhibition is on through the first of June 2025, but I'm assuming *Ouroboros* will be around longer than that, given how much it took just to get it there in the first place.

DC: Just a little bit. Yeah, 500 years is basically what has been estimated for the longevity of the materials. But I think, in everything that Lindy does, it's about an understanding that things never really begin and end. It's part of a continuum. Its presence in the sculpture garden is a really interesting physical resonance with some other works that also engage with this essence of ephemerality and permanence. For example, the James Turrell work *Within, Without*, where you can enter into this shrine-like environment, you're surrounded by water

and then gaze up at the moving sky. Also, Fujiko Nakaya's fog sculpture that emerges and dissipates at different times of the day. So I think Lindy's presence in the sculpture garden has a really interesting resonance with these international giants of outdoor art. But it is interesting to think about landing lightly on this country, I suppose. What does it mean to have a piece of artwork sitting outside of the National Gallery for a certain time? Certainly, I don't think Lindy is concerned with permanence in any way, shape or form. But it would be nice to preserve *Ouroboros* for the long term, at least for now. And I suppose that's the other thing, the experience of *Ouroboros* and the experience of lots of Lindy's public artwork. They stay with you, these motifs of these openings, these universal symbols of circles, the regeneration of life. It's universal, and they stay with you. I can imagine that she would love the idea of *Ouroboros* at the end, if there is an end to its life being reconfigured, melted down and reused for something else. I think that's completely in keeping with the spirit of the work.

AT: And there's also a new work called *Charred Forest* that sounds really intriguing.

DC: Yes, *Charred Forest* is a new work that Lindy's created, especially for the exhibition that goes alongside *Ouroboros*. The exhibition is the celebration, I suppose, of Lindy's career to date, showing the progression of her studio work to something like *Ouroboros*, connecting her studio work to her public art practice. And *Charred Forest* is a work that she has been thinking about for some time, with the devastating bushfires that have happened in Australia, especially on the east coast, where Lindy lives. These motifs of these charred trees in the landscape left a really profound effect on her. When you think about a dead or charred tree, still got life in it, you scratch away at the surface, and there's still wood there that has life and spirit in it. When Lindy saw these trees, they actually were in this swamp environment, she said, and it had just rained. And hence, so the trees had this reflection that actually doubled their size. So there were the trees, but also their reflection in the water. And this image stayed with her for a long time. And she knew she wanted to make a work about it. It's completely in her wheelhouse of engaging with the dualities of existence. Where Lindy lives, on Bundjalung country, just near Byron Bay, in northern New South Wales, she's got friends up there who have an amazing property. This property is filled with camphor laurel trees. Thinking about Lindy's engagement with her materials, that really strong connection to understanding what certain materials mean and what importance and associations they can bring to her works. Camphor laurel is essentially a pest in the Australian environment. It's an introduced species that came to Australia via colonialism and has been planted in all sorts of places, especially around the east coast of Australia. Native wildlife has been displaced to make room for this tree. And it's endemic, just everywhere. So Lindy's friends, Andy and Deirdre Plummer, have systematically been felling camphor laurel from their property to make way for plantations of native trees. And they offered to Lindy to use some of these trees for her art. And so Lindy took them up on that and started selecting some trees with this work in mind and has for about 18 months been working with her studio to create this work.

So the char on this work has been applied with a preservation technique taken from Japanese artistry called *shou sugi ban*, which essentially is a way of charring wood in order to preserve it. It has an aesthetic as well as practical use. So these logs have been charred all over in multiple layers to bring about this beautiful glossy in some places, matte in some others, black surface that is amazing to look at. *Charred Forest* is essentially imagination of a forest. There's seven trees. The tallest is about seven metres tall, arranged on this beautiful, highly reflective base plate. So this image that Lindy saw in nature with the trees being reflected in this pool of water has now been brought to life in the gallery through again, the work of many hands and Lindy's amazing imaginative brain. The forest is covered from about three quarters of the way down. The trees have this beautiful stardust pattern of conical holes drilled into the surface that actually now when we look at the work installed, instead of looking like this bright white wood, actually come across as really golden, which is really fascinating to think of this gold emerging from this blackness. So, yeah, it's a really powerful work. In terms of the context of the exhibition, *Charred Forest* is at its centrepiece, really. It's her newest sculptural work that isn't a public work, I suppose, and it's surrounded by a variety of other work from throughout Lindy's career, as well

as some other new ones. So it's been a really beautiful way to explore Lindy's practice and examine how she brings her techniques and her conceptual underpinning of these material histories to different things like bronze and paper and even photography.

AT: So just listening to you describe *Charred Forest* specifically, it makes me think of how much people miss when they don't read those little plaques next to the artwork. Because everything you're describing to me, I'm like, "oh, okay, so these are trees that basically represent colonialism." They are something that is not native, was brought here by white people that forced out native species and that some people are now trying to reclaim that land for indigenous species. That alone is just such fascinating symbolism that, if I didn't know that and I didn't bother reading that little plaque next to the artwork, I just be like, "okay, cool, they're trees." I always find it so interesting how much deeper artwork is, for the most part, when you learn the story behind it and all of these different elements that she's bringing in, using a Japanese preservation technique, and the referencing of the fires that had such a toll on so many people in this country. It's such a deeper experience.

DC: Yeah, yeah. I completely agree, because I'm a museum and an art nerd. And so I often veer towards the label instead of the work, which is a very bad habit, and I should stop that. But the generosity in Lindy's work is that you can have an experience with the work without knowing that. And it comes down to the universality of the things that she creates, trees, the concept of blackness symbolising despair and the end to something. But it can also refer to something like the enormity of the cosmos and infinite possibility. One thing to point out about the choice of wood, I suppose, is that it in itself has a duality. Yes, it represents the ongoing effects of colonialism. But on the flip side, camphor is a really potent material in Chinese and a lot of Asian cultures. It's a really revered wood that's used for a variety of things, religious sculptures. You might know the smell of camphor by opening one of your elder relatives wardrobes – it gets rid of moths, it's used for that preserving of your own clothes. It has a variety of medicinal uses in another culture. So again, it's this dualistic understanding of materials. Nothing is only one thing. It depends on the context, this deepening of knowledge. The more you dig, the more you'll find out. And there's always more to know with Lindy's work. And there's lots of things that connects to in relation to her spiritual practice, her beliefs and her practice as a whole. I think it is interesting to kind of think about her trajectory over the last 40 years as an artist and to say to yourself, "how did she get here? How did she get to the point of creating something like *Ouroboros*?" I think it's fascinating to think that she trained as a painter. She wanted to become an abstract painter when she first entered art school and had some really transformative experiences going to, as is the old kind of story with Australian artists, going to Europe, going to London and visiting museums and seeing the great masterworks that we all learn about at art school. There's this connective tissue that runs through her practice that is really important to keep in mind.

AT: It also seems like both works that we've discussed so far have that element of rebirth, because one of the things that people do focus on with bushfires is that in a lot of traditional indigenous practices, you do burn off in a controlled way to then reinvigorate growth going forward. And so, again, in a controlled manner, it can actually be used to stimulate growth and health. And the fact that she's pierced, so you can see through the char to the original timber underneath, it almost feels like a glimpse of what comes after the char.

DC: Absolutely. Yeah. It comes back to this idea for me that nothing is fixed. Yeah, it's one of those intrinsic things to the Buddhist faith, that there's no darkness without light. In order to truly know oneself, you have to go to that point of the most pain. And there's beauty in that, but there's also kind of terror as well. That's actually something that she's mentioned in reference to *Ouroboros*. The experience of going into the work is like going into the belly of the beast, which I think is a beautiful expression. It has so many connotations. I think of something like *Moby Dick*, you're going into this creature, not knowing what you might discover about yourself in the process. And in saying, going into *Ouroboros* is going into the belly of the beast. That's what Lindy means. She wants people to have a space to confront things that are painful about life, but also give them a

space where it's okay to do that. And that's one of the teachings of Buddhism. It's something that Zen practice allows. Just to sit with uncomfortable concepts and ideas and not necessarily react, not necessarily have to do anything, but to have that sensation of perdurance instead of endurance. You're sitting with these things instead of against them or trying to change them. It's a kind of challenge almost to the viewer to reconcile that there is no good without bad. There's no dark without light and vice versa. And that's okay. This cyclical nature is inbuilt to everything that you'll see in *Ouroboros* and in the exhibition.

AT: I'm just recalling that you were saying earlier that there are these throughlines and connections that she's finding between First Nations Australian culture and beliefs and things that she's seeing reflected in her own Chinese heritage. But when you say belly of the beast and entering to face things, coming from a Judeo-Christian background, that makes me think of Jonah and the whale and "how are you going to get through this experience?" I'm not a particularly religious person, but it's just fascinating that these different images that we have across different cultures and one person interprets it one way based on their perspective, but someone else might have a completely different experience, even though you are able to see those connections.

DC: Yeah, and it comes back to this universality, and *Ouroboros* is the perfect example of that. There are these images of ouroboros in lots of ancient cultures, ancient Greece, the ancient Egyptians, Norse cultures. The alchemists were even conjuring the ouroboros in the way that they wanted to change materials into these life-affirming elixirs. So these universal symbols that, yeah, no matter what your background, no matter what kind of language inhabits your speech and mind and heart, it's understandable on so many different levels, this interconnection of Chinese and First Nations Australian cultures is something that's really fascinating. And I'm not aware of too many other artists who are actively following this line of inquiry. In terms of *Ouroboros*, what Auntie Jude, who was the First Nations advisor on this project, brought to light for Lindy was the resonance of *ouroboros* to the Rainbow Serpent. And in lots of Australian First Nations knowledges and spiritualities, the Rainbow Serpent is the bringer of water and how terrain is made and how country looks like country. And in Chinese culture, the dragon is a benevolent sky spirit that also makes the rain happen. So it's these understandings of nature, culture, cosmos that transcend culture, time, and lots of these contemporary barriers that I suppose exist in the world that we live in now. And yeah, Lindy is very keen on breaking those down and showing us how much in common we actually have with each other.

AT: So apart from, "everyone should read the text," maybe look at it and then read the text and then look at it again, what do you hope that visitors will get out of the exhibition, out of *Charred Forest*, out of *Ouroboros*, individually or as a whole?

DC: I hope visitors come with a sense of curiosity. And this is something that Lindy has said that she wants her works to incite, to be curious about what they're stepping into for *Ouroboros*. It has these dualities. Its surface on the outside is very reflective and reflects its environment. But then when you go into it, it's your space. And you can look out. It's this sense of curiosity, I think, that Lindy and also the Gallery would like people to get out of this experience and also bring to this experience and to engage with the work in the spirit with which it was made. The experience of feeling like an individual in this massive world, but also how it feels to be part of something greater, which is central to Lindy's understanding of Buddhism and how she uses that and channels that through her art. And so thinking about the exhibition, I hope people experience the breadth of Lindy's creativity. It knows no material bounds whatsoever. It covers about 25 years of her practice. So I really hope people come away with it, with an understanding of the enormous creative and cultural ground that she's covered in her long and storied career, but also just to have an experience with art and whatever that means for you, whether it brings up the good, the bad, something different. I think that's very much in keeping with the spirit with which Lindy makes work.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast, and remember, well behaved women rarely make history.