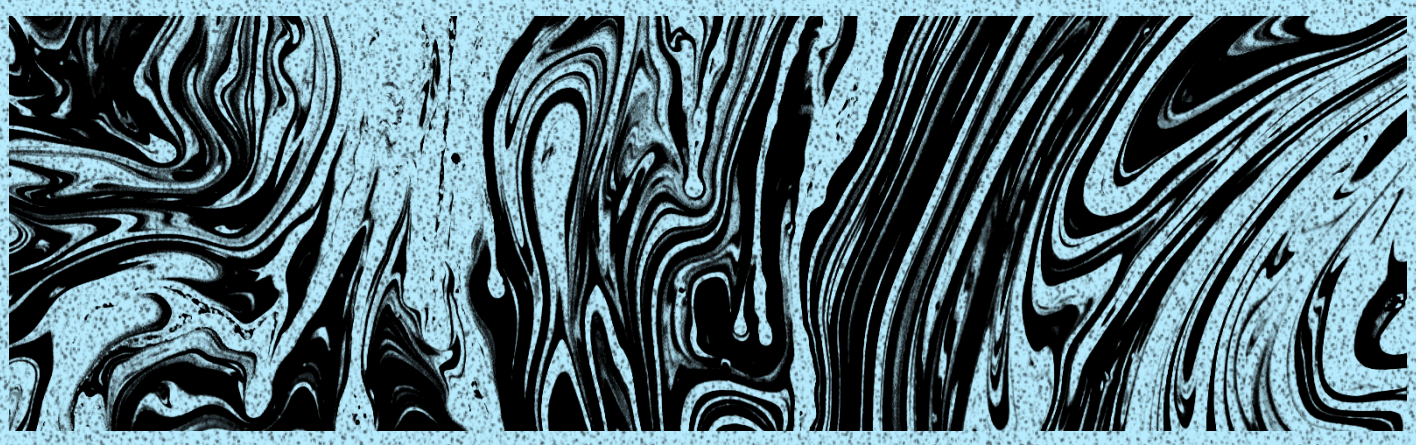
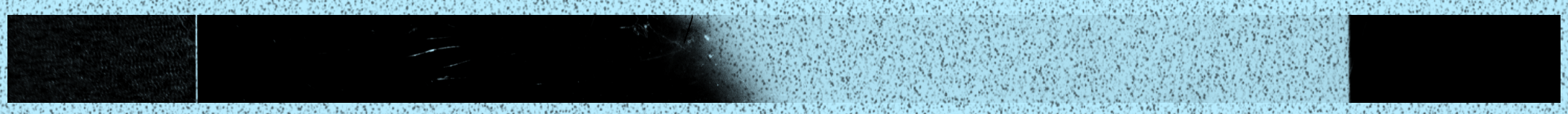
ORBIT





A Place to Call Home

by Monique Grbec

reflecting on

Charcoal

by Keia McGrady

Performed at Dancehouse,
29-31 Oct, 2026



DANCEHOUSE

SYDNEY DANCE COMPANY

Australian Government

Creative Australia

What is in the night sky is reflected across the lands we call home. Stories about the sky teach us about Country and humanity, and how we are interconnected. There are sky stories that are the same across the globe, and there are stories written into the lands that bless us with means to survive and thrive. Charcoal is a story that travels from deep time into a contemporary gallery space. Universal and viscerally intimate, it is an autobiographical expression of healing and redemption.

Created by Githabul, Migunberri, Gomeroi, choreographer and performer Keia McGrady, the multimodal narrative was inspired by a desire to reconcile her experience of cultural privilege with the lack of opportunity and enforced monoculture experienced by her Aboriginal family in the 1970s. Seeded during a BlakDance residency in 2021-2022, the work has evolved through mentorship and funding from Performing Lines Tasmania and Arts Tasmania, and was selected into ORBIT 2026, the pioneering national touring program led by Australian Dance Theatre (SA), Dancehouse (VIC) and Sydney Dance Company (NSW). In the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contemporary dance canon, Charcoal is a human version of the sprawling saga of Frances Rings' Flora, the Bangarra collaboration with The Australian Ballet, alongside the ephemeral portrait that is Stephen Page's Moth, the third dance in the Life Cycle section of Bangarra's Bush.



'Charcoal' (2026) by Keia McGrady. Photo by Dan Boud.



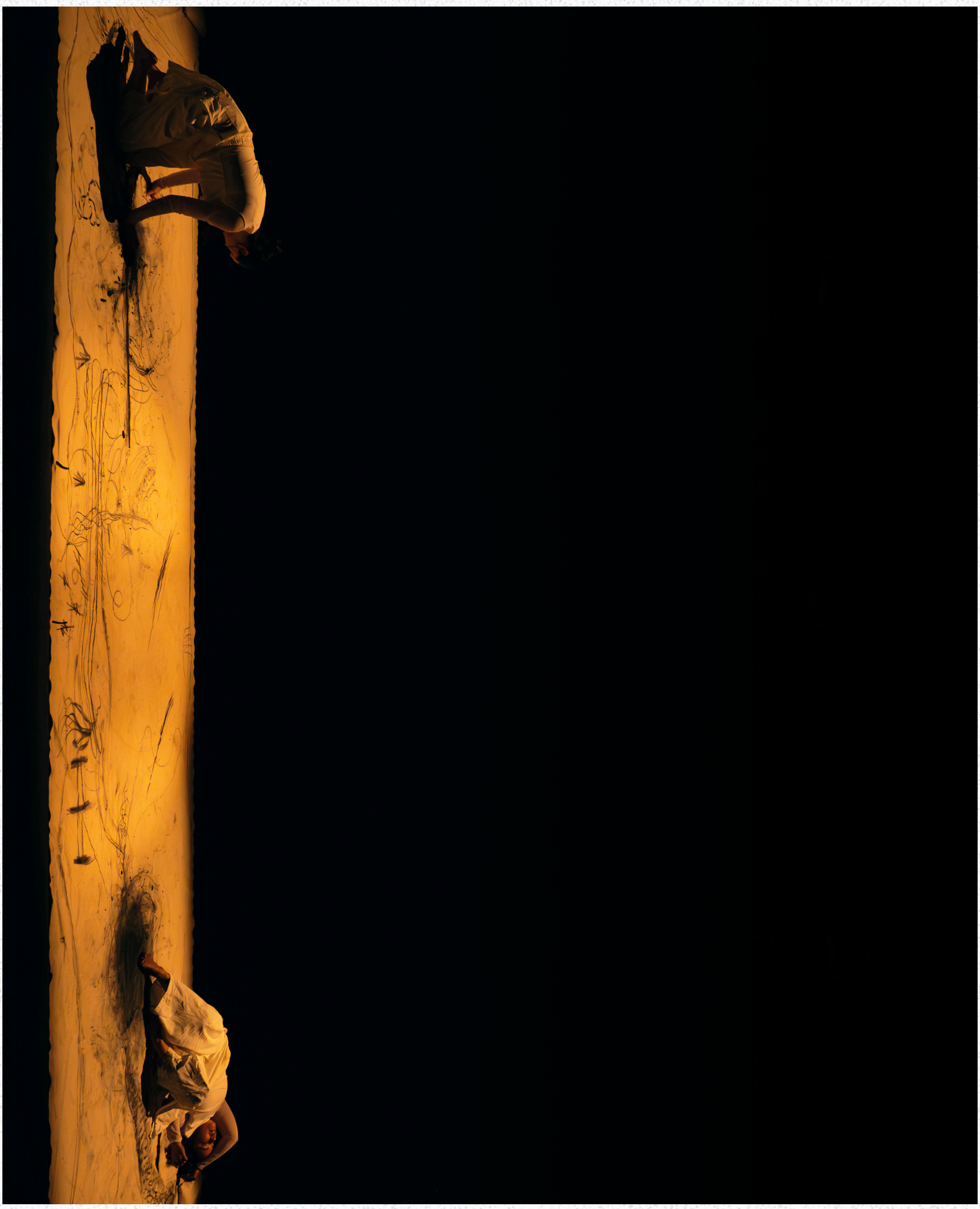
Keia shares the stage with celebrated Gamilaroi, Wadawurrung, Yinarr curator and performer Amelia Jean O’Leary (Sitting Ganaay, Ngamaa, Sad Eyes). The symbiotic rapport of their multi-year collaborative working relationship radiates. Reflecting the patterns of a planetary orbit, their paths balance between the gravitational pull of expression, and the forward momentum of experience. They are a pleasure to watch.

'Charcoal' (2026) by Keia McGrady. Photo by Dan Boud.

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The blackout darkness of the Sylvia Staehli Theatre, Dancehouse, softens with a sepia glow. Keia and Amelia stretch toward the warmth. Faces raised, the soulful glow awakens a pulsing rhythm of life. The achromatic layers of their loose fitting linen tunics, designed by Noah Johnson, shift with the push and pull of magnetic attraction, of connection and disconnection.

On the floor is a large sheet of linen canvas. With gentle, ordered movement, like they are unfolding a large white bedsheet, Keia and Amelia each take a corner and pull the sheet across the floor. They secure the corners with sand bags.



'Charcoal' (2026) by Keia McGrady. Photo by Dan Boud.



I didn’t learn how to manage an unruly sheet from my mum. Or very much about domestic upkeep. My mum, taken from her family at six months old, then removed from school on her fourteenth birthday, was raised to be a maid. In the 1960s a tight and tidy sheet on a mattress was a worthy skill for an Aboriginal girl. Like Keia and Amelia, my mum’s step was slow. Except hers was not driven by power and purpose, my mum was resigned to a life of duty and shame. Refuge, orphanage, hospital, hospice. No - place to call home.

'Charcoal' (2026) by Keia McGrady. Photo by Dan Boud.

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The grace of living performance is mesmerising. It soothes a truth I cannot name, about how the intense mystery of the black floor is overpowered by the barren, stark white of the linen canvas. A few days after witnessing the work I read Larissa Behrendt's latest book, Finding Justice, and she explains how our Australian constitution "sits on top of" Aboriginal culture and law, and how it works to extinguish Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity, and self-determination. She shows how colonial policies to "smooth the pillow of a dying race", were sustained through silence. My Mum maintained the silence. I have the urge to scream.

The linen canvas makes a giant banner across the stage. Keia and Amelia sit cross legged at different ends. Quiet, surveying. Breathing. A sepia light colours the white of the canvas, then with a thrumming hum-like stymie of sound, the light softens to blue. Hands spark upward, ever upward, around and flashing forward. They sweep across the face in the motion of water flowing. A cleansing.



'Charcoal' (2026) by Keia McGrady. Photo by Dan Boud.



Charcoal sticks in hand, Keia and Amelia mark the linen with swirling winds and waves of shading. Cosmic radiation erupts, flames flicker, and torrents of sparks ignite. The frenetic energy is electric, and two different velvety campfires are brought to life.

The campfires look like depictions of celestial bodies featured in images from the Aṉangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands, far-north South Australia. Except for the colour palette, they could be found on the dress I am wearing. It is a Zaachariaha Fielding design, from his 2024 collaboration with Romance Was Born. They called the collection ‘the nothing’ but never spoke of why.

'Charcoal' (2026) by Keia McGrady. Photo by Dan Boud.

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Against the black sky backdrop, Keia and Amelia are standing and stretching taller. The white of their linen tunics is smudged with charcoal. They move to the front of the canvas and two small piles of the charcoal sticks. Like they are stomping out a fire, they drill their feet into the charcoal. The gritty pitch of the crunching charcoal echoes through the theatre and elicits an autonomous sensory meridian response.

There is an explosion. Gunshot?

A digital thrum compels Keia and Amelia to cross the banner and unite. There is safety in their intimate embrace. Held by a spotlight, they move off the paper and their shadows multiply. The play of light, a standout element of Jason James' lighting design, creates a series of couples circumnavigating a crowd.



'Charcoal' (2026) by Keia McGrady. Photo by Dan Boud.

Feet close to the floor, stomping and shuffling, Keia and Amelia honour the ceremony of our ancestors. In a circular path their rhythmic hand and arm movements gather and collect. Emboldening Western instrumentals, the pulsing of clapsticks conjures the essence of dawn. The awakening feels like a reclamation and my heart beat grows with the crescendo. Listening with my eyes, the performers answer the clapsticks and look at us, the audience.

The sound design by Joshua Santospirito and Waveney Yasso, Yuwi Burra, South Sea Island drum and voice composer, is magnificent. The luxury effervescence of a soundscape reminiscent of Philip Glass' Einstein on the Beach is humanised by the heart-sound of the clap-sticks. Unity is elevated with soul. Glorious.



'Charcoal' (2026) by Keia McGrady. Photo by Dan Boud.



A masterful building of melody is enhanced with an azure light. The patterns and shapes on the stage form a language, a dialogue between fire and water. Sparks set loose and drift and gush with a splash and a splat.

Keia and Amelia, hinged at the hip, bend forward into the Uttanasana posture. Their palms flat on the floor, greet the earth but the sanctity is slavelike, and their rotational flow across the stage changes to side by side marching, in straight ordered lines. The strength and momentum is impressive but I yearn to see their faces and the chest that holds their heart - and to know that they are free.

Is there a return to Country? The silhouettes multiply, and time turns. Is this a reincarnation? There is a disjointed movement that brings Keia and Amelia back to human form. They fold the linen canvas. A large black mark on the base looks like a blood stain in the middle of a bedsheet. I think of menstrual pain, and loss, and the weight of inherited responsibility. For as much as our responsibility to our ancestors is a gift of powerful and necessary purpose, cleaning up the colonial mess is exhausting. A lonely job that mostly feels like screaming silently into the void.

'Charcoal' (2026) by Keia McGrady. Photo by Dan Boud.

Keia and Amelia re-open the sheet and hang it as a backdrop, like art on a gallery wall. They sit and look, as we sit and look: quiet, surveying, breathing. The sepia hue returns to colour the linen. It has the faded yellow hue of tired, old paper, and I'm comforted that the history of Australia is being re-written with lived experience. Keia's Charcoal captures time past and shows us how the language of dance communicates the universal truths of our evolving culture.



Monique Grbec is a writer, critic and multidisciplinary artist. They regularly review culture for The Saturday Paper, among others. They won the Lord Mayor's Creative Writing Award for First Nations Memoir (2019) and their visual artwork is held in the Koorie Heritage Trust Collection. Monique is currently working with recycled metals, and scripting an immersive VR experience.

'Charcoal' (2026) by Keia McGrady. Photo by Dan Boud.