Cross cultural exchanges in craft and design

Edited by Louise Hamby
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Cross-Cultural Collaborations

By Dr Louise Hamby

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Editorial

Cross-cultural exchanges in craft and design are the focus for the second issue of *craft + design enquiry*. Members of the Craft Australia Research Centre initiated the theme for this issue based on outcomes from the successful conference and workshop, *Selling Yarns 2: Innovation for sustainability* presented by The Australian National University, Craft Australia and the National Museum of Australia in March 2009. Indigenous textiles and fibre practice were at the heart of this event dedicated to all aspects of the economic expressions of fibre primarily by Aboriginal Australian artists. The call for papers for this issue was open to anyone who wished to contribute writing developed from any of the following themes:

- Tourism and museums as a driver for innovative cross cultural practice
- The role of design and manufacture in cross cultural engagement
- Innovation for social and cultural sustainability
- The impact of government policies on cultural sustainability
- Mentoring between communities
- The internet and the global market for Indigenous craft and design

I wish to thank all writers who submitted their work to *craft + design enquiry* and the peer-reviewers for the journal. We strive to achieve high quality research in the area of craft and design with contributors coming from diverse backgrounds: academics and/or practitioners from art, craft, design areas, material culture, anthropology, cultural studies and allied areas. The second issue’s writers are academics and curators from the areas of art history, anthropology, material culture, craft and design. The artworks discussed in this issue are primarily of fibre. Various types of exchanges, from materials to techniques to collaborations, are covered. Kevin Murray’s article asks difficult questions regarding collaborations
between Australian designers and the makers of their products in Pakistan, India and Rwanda. The arena of Australian Aboriginal craft forms the major content of this issue with contributions by Christiane Keller, Sylvia Kleinert and Daphne Nash. Works from artists living in the south eastern part of Australia feature bringing to the forefront their contributions which have not always been as acknowledged as that of their northern counterparts. The types of objects discussed; fibre sculpture, shell work and clothing, are quite different but have in common a role in the maintenance and assertion of cultural identity for their makers. Perhaps this is where the biggest difference lies between the makers overseas and in the Australian Aboriginal work. The work produced overseas tends to retain more of the identity of the Australian designer rather than the Indigenous maker.

Christiane Keller points out in *From Baskets to Bodies: Innovation within Aboriginal Fibre Practice* that all the artists first learned to make functional items before venturing into sculptural works. This is most likely the case for most of the artists working in fibre who want their work seen as art. In order to bring to the forefront cultural identity many contemporary artists in the southeast go through a process of cultural renewal which often involves first learning about past techniques, materials and items made for specific purposes regardless of the materials, shell or possum fur. Sylvia Kleinert in *Clothing the postcolonial body: art, artifacts and action in south eastern Australia* points to the effects of these revivals. ‘Far from being a mere replication of the past, cultural revivals involve a complex process of recreation and transformation, proceeding by way of memory and history and narratives of identity and experience that carry political, moral and cultural force.’

Exchange of a cross-cultural nature in the broadest sense was the direction for the issue. The questions of what was exchanged, who was involved and the ultimate outcome of the exchange are ones I wish to interrogate. There are deliberate exchanges between different Australian Aboriginal people themselves. Within the Arnhem Land region of the Northern Territory, Rembarrnga and Kuninjku have exchanged techniques of twining pandanus in both the round and flat knotting of pandanus. In the Murray area of Victoria, Ngarrindjeri women have taught others, and on the South Coast of New South Wales Cheryl Davison has taught other Aboriginal women shell techniques. There are the unknown exchanges that have taken place between the north and the south. The technique of coiling practiced by many Aboriginal women was taken to Arnhem Land by European missionaries and has become the major technique used by women now. In more recent times the Aboriginal women from different parts of the country have come together, as described by Keller with *Two Countries, One Weave* and in 2005 women from Gunbalanya worked with Victorian and South Australian women in workshops associated with *Twined Together: Kunmadj Njalehnjaleken*. Daphne Nash in her paper *From
shell work to shell art: Koori women creating knowledge and value on the South Coast of NSW records another exchange between missionaries and south coast women in regards to teaching shell work.

The other type of exchange noted by all authors is between non-indigenous and Indigenous people. Many of these have been in the areas of teaching techniques or styles of working to others. One of the most notable of these teachers/facilitators is Nalda Searles from Perth. She has worked with many Aboriginal people and others across the country teaching her own style of coiling and perhaps above all, confidence to express your own ideas with whatever materials you have to hand. Others like Thisbe Purich from Darwin, have worked to introduce basket-making skills to women from the desert with materials such as raffia and yarn. The mass manufactured materials, such as wool and synthetic yarns, are often used with natural ones like spinifex or reeds. Other artists like Lorraine Connelly-Northey take discarded materials to make powerful statements about their own cultural background. Connelly-Northey makes references to both sides of her family heritage with works like An o’possum skin cloak.

The last type of exchange is one of collaboration or working together. The term collaboration has multiple meanings. For the purposes of our cross-cultural interests I would like to define collaboration as a process in which two parties work together for a common goal. In the process there would be shared knowledge and experiences with equal benefit. Kevin Murray’s case studies in his article Outsourcing the hand: An analysis of craft-design collaborations across the global divide provide the scope to understanding the range of collaborations and who benefits from them. The creative aspects of most of his studies were very much one-sided towards the Australian designer not the women making the product. If the common goal for most of these collaborations was an economic one, it is unclear whether or not both parties equally achieved the desired result. There are many other possible benefits including the revival of cultural skills, and improving the lifestyle of the people providing the labour. As Murray points out, ‘What is needed now is a mechanism for authenticating the nature of participation in craft outsourcing.’ And, I might add for collaborations across cultures, the nature of the creative aspects of the process.

I return to Selling Yarns 2 and its focus on the economic aspects of Aboriginal fibre in craft and design. This event was pivotal for collaboration between a group of Aboriginal women and Sasha Titchkosky from Koskela in Sydney. Titchkosky was seeking products made in Australia produced in collaboration with others. She was excited about fibre work from Arnhem Land and was seeking collaboration with makers. When Steve Hutchinson (former manager Elcho Island Arts and Craft) told her she should go to Selling Yarns: Australian Indigenous textiles and good business in the 21st century in Darwin in 2006, she responded with enthusiasm, ‘Right, that is where I am going’ (Titchkosky 2010b). After thinking about product design and competition she visited Injalak Arts and Crafts to meet artists before she went to Selling Yarns 2. The reader is directed to Kevin Murrays article New Things: Koskela lights made in Elcho
Island in Craft Australia’s Library series (Murray 2010) for the rest of the story of the beginning of the collaboration with artists at Galiwin’ku and Mapuru and the exhibition resulting from this work, Yuta Badaya.


Photograph: Louise Hamby.

In one sense this collaboration is not that different to the one undertaken by Martina Dempf and the artists from Rwanda described by Kevin Murray. A main difference being that in Rwanda, Dempf was trying to ‘recover the lost tradition’. In Arnhem Land there was no need to recover any skills or materials; these have been well established for centuries. A concern of Titchkosky was the possibility that what was already accepted as an art form might be seen as a less acceptable commercial product. ‘The idea of combining contemporary design with that traditional art form might be seen in some ways as devaluing the products or the pieces because we were taking them out of the gallery context.’ This has been partially resolved in that within the range of products promoted and designed by Koskela these are seen as ‘art pieces’ (Titchkosky 2010a). Most people would have to agree with Titchkosky that after seeing the exhibition Yuta Badaya that ‘As sculptural pieces they have two different lives, one life during the day and then another one at night-time where there is another dimension added to that particular form. (Titchkosky 2010b)’ This has been the case partially because the women making these items have previous experience in making traditional cultural items in the same way that Keller points out in her article.
Titchkosky realised that perhaps the collaboration did not start in the best way culturally with all the women, particularly Roslyn Malngumba. ‘It could have been a smoother path with her and the Mapuru weavers’ due to the fact that she was not able to go to Mapuru to visit with the women there. The women did not really understand the project whereas Mavis Ganambarr had been involved earlier in the project. The collaboration continues past the exhibition. An economic goal was common for both parties. Titchkosky reiterates this but also points to the opportunities for newer audiences, not just for the lampshades but for their other work. ‘It provides another legitimate avenue for her community to earn some income and participate in something that exposes their community and their art form to a whole other audience.’

The Arnhem Land-Koskela cross-cultural collaboration is an on-going one with different stages. The production of the exhibition at Object and two subsequent groups of lampshades are what Dion Teasdale, the Manager at Elcho Island Arts, refers to as the first stage of the process. The first group of work resulted in the creation of fourteen lampshades involving ten women. The artists from Galiwin’ku are Mavis Warngilna Ganambarr, Margaret Gudumurruwuy, Rosemary Gutili, Mary Guyula and Kerry Malaray. The Arnhem Weavers Collective women from Maparu were Roslyn Malngumba, Linda Marathuwar, Margaret Bambalara, Caroline Gulumindiwuy and Julienne Gitpulu. This stage
was characterised by women understanding how they could make their fibre styles fit within the standardised frames and accompanying safety regulations required to sell the lampshades.

From the beginning of the project Mavis Ganambarr has taken on a leadership role both with partner, Sasha Titchkosky, and with the women in Arnhem Land. She is the Artistic Liaison Officer for Elcho Island Arts and a talented artist in many fibre based media. Her role in the collaboration has been one in which she has been able to gain personal professional development skills in management and working with outsiders. She has overseen the making of the second grouping of eight lampshades, held meetings with the women as a group and sees each one individually to discuss their work. Teasdale reports that the women see the work as being two pieces, an artwork on its own and then a transformed piece when it is lit. Many of the women had not seen the works as lampshades with electric lights in place so the lighting of the second group was met by ‘lots of squeals and magic (Teasdale 2010).’

The second stage of the project centres around a lampshade that Mavis Ganambarr brought to Sydney to discuss with Titchkosky and her partner Russell Koskela. This has subsequently been referred to as the frameless shade. This has been part of the great leap forward in the creative thinking of Ganambarr and the other women. It has lead to a period of research and development from both parties. The Aboriginal women have gone to the bush for alternative fibres to use as frames and Titchkosky has gone to other collaborators and manufactures to sort out structural, design and safety concerns (Teasdale 2010). This project has generated tremendous excitement which is spreading. Nicolas Rothwell noted in his recent article on Mavis Ganambarr. ‘This is the context within which fresh forms of fibre art have spread so rapidly through Galiwinku: the art centre is full of work by women set on experiment (Rothwell 2010).’ It has extended beyond Elcho. In March of this year the art staff from the fledging Gapuwiyak Culture and Arts Centre visited Elcho Island Arts to observe how everything was working there. When I visited Gapuwiyak in April of this year there were the beginnings of new lampshades hanging from the ceiling!

The Koskela-Arnhem Land collaboration is an exciting example of a cross-cultural exchange involving design and manufacturing, mentoring between communities and an equitable outcome for all parties. The lampshade project has brought forward mentoring of less experienced artists by older ones in the same community and for those further afield in the same way as the explosion of fibre sculpture described by Keller, the shell work by Nash and the possum cloak revival by Kleinert. As more people become aware of projects like the ones discussed in this issue there will be more opportunities for individuals in design and manufacturing to form relationships with Indigenous artists. In order for these partnerships to function a relationship of trust and respect for the skills both parties bring has to be formed. This can lead to Indigenous artists gaining skills and abilities to produce and market their own work as we have seen with the Rwandan women’s jewellery project described by Murray. It is an exciting time for artists working across cultures from an economic and creative aspect.
Plate 3: Mavis Ganambarr, Roslyn Malngumba holding the frameless lampshade and Dion Teasdale at the showroom of Koskela. Sydney. February 6, 2010.

Photograph: Louise Hamby.

Bibliography


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From Baskets to Bodies: Innovation Within Aboriginal Fibre Practice

By Christiane Keller

Dr Christiane Keller is an anthropologist, art historian and writer. She was awarded a PhD from the Australian National University (Creativity and Innovation in Contemporary Rembarrnga Sculpture in the Maningrida Region, Central Arnhem Land, 2007) and MA in anthropology and art history from the Albert- Ludwigs University in Freiburg, Germany (Aboriginal Art in Daly River: Painting and its Reception in the Australian Artworld, 1999).

Christiane has worked within the fields of academia and museums. As curator at the Western Australian Museum she worked on a number of permanent and temporary exhibitions. She currently holds an Honorary Research Fellowship at the University of Western Australia, and is Research Associate at the Western Australian Museum. Her research interests encompass Indigenous art and aesthetics with a focus on sculpture, fibre art and fashion.

Abstract: This essay is concerned with the emergence of Indigenous fibre sculpture, a movement within contemporary Australian Aboriginal art. Here I discuss the work of key practitioners including Lena Yarinkura, Marina Murdilnga and Anniebell Marrngamarrnga from Central Arnhem Land; Yvonne Koolmatrie and Treahna Hamm from the Murray River region; the Central Desert artists Kantjupayi Benson, Ivy Hopkins, Jean Burke and the Utopia artists.

Many of these fibre artists developed their sculptural forms through mastering and combining long practised techniques while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of material and form. I argue that it is the urge of fibre artists to bring their connection to country, cultural heritage and contemporary life into the foreground of their artistic practice that has led them to the sculptural form. Making fibre sculpture allows the artists to pass on cultural knowledge and skills and in doing so helps to ensure the sustainability of their cultures and local economies.

I also argue that ‘going sculptural’ has helped re-position Aboriginal fibre art in the art market and its re-evaluation as fine art; an important step toward establishing a sustainable art practice within the wider art market.

Re-positioning fibre

Since Aboriginal art conquered the national and international art market it has diversified enormously and artists have explored new forms, techniques and
materials to create exciting and innovative work. This has also been the case within the genre of Aboriginal fibre art where the production of fibre sculpture is a very recent development.

This essay is not about the art versus craft debate and while many authors, in particular, Morphy (2005, 2008) and Myers (2002) have written extensively about the history of recognition of Aboriginal art as ‘fine art’ I will only briefly outline the key issues that helped reposition Indigenous fibre works from craft into art. As Grace Cochrane so eloquently wrote about the crafts in Australia and New Zealand: ‘In the last fifty years, the benchmark for success in the crafts has been primarily in their acceptance as art’ (Alfoldy 2007, p.63).

Many factors contributed to the repositioning of Aboriginal fibre in the art market. These include Government funding to set up art centres, employment of art professionals as well as artist training and exchange which became available in the 1970s. Regular marketing outlets and feedback from the art market helped Aboriginal artists to adapt their skills to make more marketable products. At the time Aboriginal art was mainly a male domain, the world of painting. The work of women was still relegated to the craft corner but over time an increasing number of female art professionals and women’s centres targeted what has since become the almost exclusively female domain of fibre art.

A critical contribution was the skilful marketing of fibre art through fibre exhibitions with accompanying publications including *Maningrida: The Language of Weaving* (1989), *Spinifex Runner* (1999) and most recently *Twined Together* (2005). Several curators consciously placed fibre objects next to the representations of these objects in paintings to highlight the ancestral link many fibre objects have. Furthermore, the establishment of extensive collections held by leading art museums such as the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Sydney and the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane helped promote fibre work in a fine art context. Equally important was the inclusion of Aboriginal fibre art in national art awards, such as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Award (NATSIAA), and the development of public art projects in which fibre art is translated into more durable media such as cast metal or wood. Outstanding examples are the *Walama Forecourt* (2000), a collaboration between Judy Watson and Maningrida fibre artists, and *The Grand Veranda* at the Darwin Entertainment Centre (2007) with a fish trap design by James Iyuna and Melba Gunjarrwanga.

But what I think contributed most to the re-evaluation of Aboriginal fibre art as fine art were the artists themselves. Their constant explorations and innovations

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1 A number of other all fibre exhibitions have also taken place. Some included Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists such as *Seven Sisters: Fibre Works Arising from the West* (2003 touring), *Woven Forms* (2006 touring), *Recoil: Change and Exchange in Coiled Fibre Art* (2008 touring). Others did not have an extensive exhibition catalogues, including *Two Countries, One Weave* (1991, Tandanya Aboriginal Cultural Institute, Adelaide), *Kunmadj Rowk: Contemporary Weaving from Maningrida* (1993 touring) and *Maningrida Threads* (2003, MCA, Sydney).
and the creation of new forms and genres have provided the crucial step. The venture into the sculptural has been significant and will be retraced for three regions in the following sections.

Fibre artists ‘going sculptural’

Today Aboriginal fibre sculpture can be found in every Australian state either produced by individuals or groups of artists. To highlight the major developments within this movement I have selected a number of key artists from three main regions; Arnhem Land, the Murray River region and the Western Desert. For all of the fibre artists mentioned here, innovation is not only a response to the art market’s need for continuously new and exciting works, but an important translation of their cultural heritage into contemporary art objects.

All fibre artists discussed in this paper first learned to make functional items including baskets, nets, bags, fish traps and other objects either indigenous or introduced to their culture. Once they comfortably mastered the employed techniques they managed to create the space for more innovative work. Playfully experimenting with existing forms the artists always pushed the limits of materials and techniques to turn a basket into a full-bodied sculpture or to transform a coiling technique into a more loose and free cobbling one, enabling the unencumbered modelling of the sculptural body. The artists are driven by the urge to depict their important stories and personal life experiences, both fuelling the ideas and energy for new creations.

1.1 Central Arnhem Land

Aboriginal people from all twelve language groups living in the Maningrida region of Central Arnhem Land have a strong tradition of producing a great variety of fibre based objects, most of which are used for hunting, fishing and gathering. Arnhem Land, however, is also known for its mostly bound paperbark sculptures used as ceremonial effigies which have provided inspiration for contemporary sculptures sold on the national and international market. Maningrida is today known for its two distinct schools of fibre sculptors that have developed their own styles despite depicting similar subject matters.

1.2 Rembarrnga school of fibre sculpture

Some ceremonial sculptures in Arnhem Land are made in a binding technique in which a core of grass or paperbark is bound with bark fibre or fibre string to form the object’s body (Emu, n.d., Plate 1). During the ceremony the dancer, whose body decoration matches that of the emu sculpture, is holding the sculpture and

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2 The term ‘cobbling’ was coined by Nalda Searles and describes the ‘feral’ cobbling material together with rough stitches. She sometimes also called it ‘mongrel stitch’ (West 2007a: 41, 73).
at some point both become the emu ancestor itself (Plate 2). These sculptures usually depict animals, birds, plants like yam, or spirits. Ronald Berndt recorded such spirit figures in 1949 as djondjon, representations of human-like spirits with one long and one short arm. They were left at an abandoned camp site, their long arm indicating the direction in which the family group had moved on. Djondjon figures might have been the inspiration for modern versions of human and spirit representations.

Plate 1: Artists unknown, Totemic Emblem (Emu), ca. 1950s, paperbark, fibre string, beeswax, feathers, natural ochres, 546 x 76 x 76 mm

Photo: courtesy of Art Gallery of New South Wales (Purchased 1962, AGNSW #A25).

3 Such figures were collected by Ronald Berndt in western and eastern Arnhem Land, for images see Berndt et al. 1980: 14.
In 1994 Kune artist Lena Yarinkura and Rembarrnga artist Bob Burruwal first experimented with this well-known technique of binding cores of paperbark with string or bark fibre. *Family Drama*, 1994, was the first of many to come (Plate 3). This sculpture group of four humans, a dog and a burial platform re-enacts a traditional burial. Then Maningrida’s arts advisor Diane Moon fostered Yarinkura’s artistic talent as a bark painter and fibre artist and recognised her potential as a sculptor. Moon reminisces about these early years:

4 In the same year *Family Drama* won the *Wandjuk Marika Three-dimensional Award* in NATSIAA and is now held by the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT).

5 In 1988, Yarinkura, together with her sister-in-law Dorothy Galaledba, was one of few women who painted in their own right. In the same year, Moon secured a Professional Development Grant from the Aboriginal Arts Board for Yarinkura to develop a solo show of her bark paintings. While the solo show at Hogarth Gallery in Sydney did not eventuate Yarinkura’s work was included in a Rembarrnga group exhibition that year.
...at that time she was mainly making the dance belts...and she had one or two for me to pick up or to come and look at it at Buluhkaduru. And when we got out there she had hung one in the curve of the bark shelter... Just the way she had hung it, the way she had...arranged it.... I just had a feeling...that she had such a sense for sculpture and architecture...and ways of arranging space. ...I remember just saying to her, keep making anything you want, just whatever you think of. Let’s make it and leave the rest to me. And eventually she did start doing that. ...I think that resulted in that first sort of family that won the art award. The Mimih family⁶ ... everybody was thinking I was crazy. I remember, as I was loading it on the plane [which was very difficult]... But we did get it on the plane and it won in the Art Award. And I think she hasn’t looked back since. (Moon 2003, pers. com., 8th October)

With the success of the sculpture at the most prestigious national Indigenous art prize a new category of contemporary Aboriginal fibre sculpture was

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⁶ This sculpture group is the above mentioned Family Drama, 1994 held in the MAGNT collection.
Yarinkura and Burruwal were encouraged by Moon’s understanding of her role as art adviser to actively foster new artists and innovative ideas and, if necessary, find or create a market for the results (Moon 1993, p.80). They produced a second narrative sculpture group *Modjarrki, Two Brothers and the Crocodile* (1995) exhibited in the 1995 *Australian National Heritage Art Award* in Canberra and now held by the Art Gallery of NSW (AGNSW). Burruwal continues to produce similar sculptures representing spirits of his country like *Wurum* and *Namarrooddo*.

Yarinkura moved on to experiment with her knowledge as a prolific fibre artist well versed in making dilly bags and fish traps. She used the technique of twining pandanus fibres to construct the bodies of her next sculpture group *Ngayang Spirit*, 1996 (Plate 4), consisting of two human-like sculptures and a twined mat. She began the figure like a fish trap with a wide opening into which she sewed carved wooden heads. The bodies of the spirits were stuffed with paperbark and painted with ochres.

![Plate 4: Lena Yarinkura, part of sculpture group Ngayang Spirit, 1996, pandanus, paperbark, wood, natural ochres and PVA glue, life size.](image)

Photo: courtesy of Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (Lena Yarinkura©, MAGNAT #ABETH-3385).
She refined her technique and started the next sculptures like a conical basket or dilly bag which then extended and retracted in diameter to shape the Yawkyawk bodies of her acclaimed Family of Yawkyawk, 1997. As can be seen in one of her later Yawkyawk, 2009 (Plate 5), the flat fin of the half-human, half-fish spirit is constructed with a technique used in twined pandanus mat-making. This combination of round and flat twining techniques within one sculpture now forms the core of Yarinkura’s sculptural work. She also makes dogs, all sorts of bush animals and spirits, and combines them in sculpture groups narrating traditional bush and hunting stories as well as local myth.

Plate 5: Lena Yarinkura, Yawkyawk, 2009, pandanus, paperbark, natural ochres and PVA glue, 1180 x 150 mm.

Photo: courtesy of Maningrida Arts & Culture (Lena Yarinkura©).

For almost ten years Yarinkura and her immediate family were the only ones to practise this kind of fibre sculpture. Yarinkura’s creation of this genre is widely acknowledged within the local and art arena. She is happy to share her techniques but insists that people should represent their own culture and spirits.

7 Again the Family of Yawkyawk won the 1997 NATSIAA Wandjuk Marika Three-dimensional Award and can be seen in West 2000: 93.
Since 2003 the techniques and sculptural forms Yarinkura invented have spread, first to other Rembarrnga and Kune practitioners and then across the Arnhem Land region (Plate 6).⁸

Plate 6: Collection of fibre work by Maningrida artists, 2010.
Photo: Clair Summers, courtesy of Maningrida Arts & Culture (Maningrida artists©).

1.3 Kuninjku school of fibre sculpture

Kuninjku women have developed their own idiosyncratic form of fibre sculptures. Artist Marina Murdilnga, daughter of renowned bark painter Mick Kubarrku, was taught by her mother how to work with fibre. She accomplished proficiency in a number of different techniques over the years. In 2003 she invented a new

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⁸ Some other Arnhem Land fibre artists, like Penny Ashley from Gapuwiyak, have ventured into making twined pandanus fibre. Although, Ashley sometimes resides with extended family members in Maningrida, she has no direct contact with Yarinkura or other Rembarrnga sculptors. She made a twined pandanus sculpture titled China Man, 2004, that was shown at the NATSIAA exhibition in 2004. Elizabeth Djutarra and Robyn Djunginy also need to be mentioned from the Ramingining region. Both have developed their own idiosyncratic sculptural forms. Djutarra is well-known for her yam sculptures made of string bound paperbark (included in the bundle of yam to be seen in Mundine et al. 1999: 204) and Djunginy for her twined pandanus bottles (West 2007a: 54f).
form of flat fibre sculptures employing a knotting technique used when making string bags and butterfly fishing nets. For her first Yawkyawk sculpture she made a frame from native jungle vine creating a fin, a protruding main body, a slender neck and a head. She filled the spaces with knotted pandanus that was subsequently painted with contrasting ochre colours. Her second Yawkyawk sculpture features dyed pandanus fibres. Kuninjku women have long been acknowledged for the vibrant colours they produce using local roots, berries, leaves and barks. Murdilnga also added feathers representing the typical algae-like hair of these spirits.

Murdilnga’s second Yawkyawk sculpture was entered in the 21st NATSIAA which triggered an enormous demand for this new work. She has not only made Yawkyawk spirits but ventured into interpretations of Dreaming sites in her country, such as Dirtbim, 2008 (Plate 7). Several other Kuninjku fibre artist took up this genre, among them Lulu Laradjby, Frewa Bardaluna and most prominently Anniebell Marrngamarrnga, together creating the Kuninjku school of fibre sculpture. Marrngamarrnga has brought the art form to new heights through the vibrant colours circulating within each section of the body and the increase of scale, complexity and intricacy (Plate 8). 9

Plate 7: Marina Murdilgna, Dirtbim, 2008, bamboo, natural dyed pandanus. 1890 x 1440 mm.
Photo: courtesy of Maningrida Arts & Culture (Marina Murdilgna©).

9 Marrngamarrnga was the only fibre artist chosen to exhibit in the National Gallery of Australia’s inaugural National Indigenous Art Triennial touring exhibition in 2008.
Yawkyawk play an important role in the Maningrida region with seven different Yawkyawk dreaming sites spread across a number of language groups. Both Rembarrnga and Kuninjku artists represent Yawkyawk from their clan lands. Yarinkura features Yawkyawk from billabongs near Bolkdjam and Goernoejangga and some Kuninjku women represent the Yawkyawk who are present at Kubumi, a waterhole close to the outstation where they live and work. While particular fibres and the locations at which they grow have strong links to the Yawkyawk complex, the connection between traditional baskets, string bags and fish nets made from these materials and the Yawkyawk complex was rather obscure. Through physically representing the Yawkyawk spirit in innovative sculptural fibre objects this connection has been brought to the forefront.

Not only techniques have spread across families and country all the way to Oenpelli, but the range of subject matter has increased as well. Freshwater crocodiles, butterflies and even representations of Dreaming sites are now also on the market. Close family links and intermarriage between different clans and language groups allow artists to share these innovative ideas and develop them...
further, as can be seen in *Butterfly*, 2006 (Plate 9), by Sylvia Brown. Brown has combined both the Rembarrnga and Kuninjku techniques of twining pandanus in the round and knotting pandanus within a flat framework.

Plate 9: Sylvia Brown, *Butterfly*, 2008, unidentified wood, pandanus fibre, paperbark and natural ochres with PVA glue, 300 x 470 x 150mm.

Photo: courtesy of Maningrida Arts & Culture (Sylvia Brown©).

Aboriginal artists travel to the major cities or overseas to see their work in exhibitions and have exposure to the reception of their own work as well as that of other artists. Although they actively engage with a world that has changed rapidly since European settlement their own cultural codes are overall intact and active. This means that some work is restricted and cannot be seen by uninitiated audiences, especially if it is used in secret-sacred ceremonies. Thus, for artists to make products for an all encompassing art market where Indigenous cultural rules of restriction cannot be enforced or monitored, they needed to extend their artistic practice.

As I have extensively discussed elsewhere (Keller 2007, chapter 7), until 2004 Rembarrnga artists produced the broadest variety of sculptural forms within the Maningrida region. This included carved wooden sculptures and a whole range of fibre sculptures made from paperbark, bark fibre, string, grass and pandanus fashioned in a range of techniques including binding, twining and knotting. Unfortunately, the constraints of this essay do not allow me to discuss Rembarrnga work in detail. However, in my earlier work I have argued that one reason for the extensive repertoire of Rembarrnga sculpture has been the desire of Rembarrnga artists to represent traditional subjects of importance to them and their culture in a way that is safe to show publicly and fibre sculpture is a medium to do so (Keller 2007, p.373f). I have also demonstrated that somewhat more relaxed cultural regulations are applied to sculptural forms than, for example, to bark paintings (Keller 2007, chapter 3 and 7). The rules that apply to bark painting in regards to the depicted subject matter and designs, as
well as the used cross-hatching and colour sequences, are not as rigorously enforced with sculptural work. Marrkarakara, a Yolngu carver, for example stated that: ‘Carvings you don’t have to ask anybody, but paintings belong to [individual] people’ (Morphy 1977, p. 64). Similarly, fewer restrictions seem to affect Rembarrnga sculpture production. I have shown that rules do apply to sculptural work but that those are certainly not as strict or controlled as in other genres. Rules are mainly applied to ensure the correct execution of designs, forms and mythologies. If such forms have not existed before, as for example, the twined pandanus sculptures, no strict regulations other than general principles of iconicity are applied, that is, the artist’s work should be as close as possible to the natural representation of the subject (Keller 2007, p. 378).

Sculptural production among Kuninjku artists can be described along similar lines although their repertoire includes more representations of dreaming sites in sculptural form than embracing expressions of daily life.

As in Central Arnhem Land, with its strong fibre tradition, artists from the Murray River region also have been inspired by their range of traditional fibre products to venture into new forms. Living in Australia’s south east where contact with white society and dispossession and dislocation of Aboriginal people occurred at a much earlier date than in the north, the fibre artists’ agenda here has been one of highlighting their Aboriginal identity and reclaiming and reinterpreting their cultural heritage.

1.4 Murray River region

Aboriginal people living along the Murray River have a long fibre tradition. Many objects of material culture are made of fibre including fish and eel traps, nets, bags and baskets. Missionaries had some influence on the fibre tradition of this region through fostering the coiling technique indigenous to Ngarrindjeri and Yorta Yorta people (West 2007b, p. 13). Ngarrindjeri fibre barely survived in objects collected by national institutions and the knowledge and skills of a few practitioners. It saw a revival in the 1980s and some artists soon ‘went sculptural’.

1.5 Lower Murray River Region (South Australia)

The first known fibre sculpture from the Murray River region was made by Ngarrindjeri artist Janet Watson in the late 1920s and acquired by the South Australia Museum (SAM) in 1940 (Cubillo-Alberts, Heritage 1995, p.125). For her Airplane,10 late 1920s, she used the coiling technique of the women from the

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10 For an image of this sculpture see Kleinert and Neale 2000: 734.
Kingston region of the lower Murray River. It is made with red coloured sedge grass \textit{[Lipospermua canescens]} distinctive for fibre work of this region (Sutton et al. 1988, p. 187f).

Watson tailored her coiling technique to produce the irregular shapes of the plane. The sedge bundles are stitched tightly over a wire frame, a technique that was adapted recently by some of the Tjanpi fibre artists from the Central and Western Desert which will be discussed later. The windows of Watson’s monoplane are made of celluloid (Kleinert and Neale 2000, p.734f).

The weaving skills from the region were believed to be extinct until Ngarrindjeri elder and artist Doreen Kartinyeri (1935-2007), under the auspices of SAM, initiated a one-day fibre workshop at Meningie in South Australia in 1982. Ellen Trevorrow and Yvonne Koolmatrie were among the workshop attendees from the local Ngarrindjeri community and learned the coiling technique and how to prepare suitable native plant fibres (Perkins et al. 2007, p.276). Both artists were instrumental in the revival of the Ngarrindjeri fibre tradition as they became tireless practitioners and teachers. Trevorrow today instructs Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal visitors to Camp Coorong while Koolmatrie is an arts educator presenting workshops in South Australia and other parts of the country.

Visits to SAM and other collections that hold historic Ngarrindjeri fibre objects including eel and yabby traps, baskets and burial containers helped Koolmatrie to re-establish forms that ‘have not been created for almost a century; a sign of the colonial dislocation of Indigenous cultural practices’ (Perkins and Kngwarreye 1997, p.12). Koolmatrie also saw Watson’s monoplane and was inspired to develop her own sculptural forms including airplanes, hot air balloons as well as other forms and figures based on local species, such as her sculptures of, \textit{Murray Cod}, \textit{Turtle} and \textit{Echidna} (Plate 10), and on Ngarrindjeri lore represented through the \textit{River Bunyip}, \textit{the Rainbow Serpent} and \textit{Prupi the Child Stealer} (Plate11).\footnote{Images of the \textit{Eel Trap}, \textit{Turtles}, \textit{River Bunyip} and the \textit{Rainbow Serpent} can be seen in West 2007a: 20, 94ff.}

In 1997 Koolmatrie’s \textit{Eel Traps} were chosen to be part of the second all Aboriginal art exhibition \textit{Fluent} shown at the prestigious Venice Biennale representing Australia’s cutting edge contemporary art.\footnote{\textit{Fluent} was curated by Hetti Perkins, Brenda L Croft and Victoria Lynn and included Yvonne Koolmatrie, Judy Watson and Emily Kame Kngwarreye.} In the catalogue Hetti Perkins writes that Koolmatrie’s eel traps

\begin{quote}
have an inherent gracefulness and balance which markedly distinguishes them from other versions. It is Koolmatrie’s intuitive process that allows the sculptural potential of the eel trap to be realised in spirited interpretations of traditional forms (Perkins and Kngwarreye 1997, p.12).
\end{quote}

The inclusion in \textit{Fluent} is not only a highlight in Koolmatrie’s national and international career as an Aboriginal fibre artist but contributed to the repositioning of Aboriginal fibre art within the international art domain as fine art. Koolmatrie is, however, not the only artist to reclaim the cultural heritage of Murray River people.
Plate 10: Yvonne Koolmatrie, Echidna, 1999, sedge and echidna quills, 143 x 474 x 283 mm.
Photo: courtesy of National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (Yvonne Koolmatrie©, Purchased 1999, NGV #1999.286).

Plate 11: Yvonne Koolmatrie, Prupi – Child Stealer, 1999, sedge grass, malee wood, fibre string from Maningrida, size unknown.
Photo: Yvonne Koolmatrie, courtesy of Yvonne Koolmatrie©.
1.6 Upper Murray River Region (Victoria and New South Wales)

Yorta Yorta artist Treahna Hamm grew up at Yarrawong located on the Murray River in Victoria. She initially established her artistic career in the capital cities along the east coast attending mainstream art schools and mainly working as a print maker. Through contact with Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative LTD in Sydney she discovered affiliations with the work of other Aboriginal artists. This experience triggered her journey back to her Aboriginal roots and after reconnecting with her mother Hamm started to incorporate Yorta Yorta stories in her work (Croft and National Gallery of Australia 2007, p.101).

In 1999 Hamm was part of a group of artists, including Lee Darroch and Vicki and Debra Couzens, who decided to revive the cloak-making tradition and reproduced the two nineteenth-century possum skin cloaks held by Museum Victoria. In 2002 Hamm participated in a Melbourne fibre workshop facilitated by Yvonne Koolmatrie and local respected weavers ‘Aunty’ Dot Peters and ‘Aunty’ Pat Harrison. This workshop inspired her fibre work with a repertoire of animals and objects. A brilliant example is *Hairyman (long legged spirit)*, 2005 (Plate 12) or *Dhungala Gundja – River Home*, 2010 (Plate 13). Again, the possibility to work fibre into sculptures allowed her to tell the story of Yorta Yorta history, culture and country in this genre.

Plate 12: Treahna Hamm, Hairyman (long legged spirit), 2005, sedge, cotton thread, 705 x 365 x 380 mm.


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13 One of the historic cloaks was made by Yorta Yorta people and collected from Maiden’s Punt in 1853 (Croft and National Gallery of Australia 2007: 102; Reynolds et al. 2005).
Hamm is now living and working in her ancestral homelands of Echuca/Moama/ Barmah along the Murray River, at the border of Victoria and New South Wales and much of her recent works are reinterpretations of traditional items sending the strong message that the connection between Yorta Yorta people and their land is still alive. Hamm also tells stories about the collective experiences of Aboriginal people and teaches history from an Aboriginal point of view.

While Murray River artists revive their fibre tradition, artists in the Central Desert created a new one, the use of tjanpi, literally ‘dried grasses’ of the region.

1.7 The Central Desert region

When in 1995 Thisbe Purich helped set up women’s centres across Central Desert communities she introduced coiling to Anangu women. She realised early on that in comparison to a lot of other art and craft activities introduced in those communities, including pottery, batik, and felting, working with local grasses and other fibres does not require a big infrastructure or a permanent

Plate 13: Treahna Hamm, Dhungala Gundja - River Home, 2010, sedge, gumnuts and fishing thread, c. 760 x 580 x 300 mm.

Photo: Treahna Hamm, courtesy of Treahna Hamm©.
work space and, therefore, suited the lifestyle of women. Most of the raw materials are harvested in the country around the communities and are cheap and relatively easy accessible. The fibre materials, works in progress and finished objects are transportable and women can take them on their travels and carry on working whenever time permits. This is one of the reasons why fibre work has spread like a wild fire across many desert communities transmitted along family networks and ceremonial relationships. Fibre artists teach their relatives and friends how to coil a basket or how to crochet a beanie. As Jo Foster has described: ‘Making baskets makes sense. Making baskets is about being in the bush, collecting grass, visiting country, hunting, teaching, learning and earning’ (Foster and Patterson 2005). Fibre work has developed into a business for Anangu women as they make objects exchangeable for ‘money, family favours or obligations’ (Purich n.d.).

Anangu people also have a pre-contact fibre tradition producing a range of ceremonial objects involving fibre as well as hair belts, head bands, hair string skirts, grass, bark and feather shoes. The most commonly used fibre techniques are spinning, string making and binding of fibres. Basket making, coiling and cobbling are new to these artists, although objects like the manguri, a donut shaped ring to help carrying pirti, the wooden bowl full of belongings or water, and ‘pukati, squashed wads of emu feathers also used as hair bun’ (Purich 2004, p.5), have strongly influenced the early Tjanpi baskets. Mary Jackson’s grass Basket, 1995 (Plate 14), was started with bundles of grass stitched together with wool and coiled into the oval shaped rim of the manguri. The bottom of the container was retrospectively filled in with patches of grass. This oval shape of the basket also bears strong resemblance to a wooden pirti.

Plate 14: Mary Jackson, Basket, native grasses, wool, 395 x 310 x 125mm.
Photo: Alice Beale, courtesy of The Western Australian Museum (Mary Jackson©, WAM #A26667).
Many of the current fibre artists work in a number of media including acrylic painting and *purnu* carving.\(^{14}\) The use of bright, alternating and often contrasting colours reflects the women’s painting background and their carving experiences made it easy to make the step from baskets to fibre sculptures.

The first known sculptural fibre object from this region was an emu by Kantjupayi Benson, followed by a dog, and later a set of *Camp Crockery*, 2001, Plate 15, that featured in the *Manguri Weaving* touring exhibition in 2001. Benson developed a rather loose coiling or what Nalda Searles, a prolific fibre artist from Western Australia, coined ‘cobbling’ technique (Nicholls 2007, p.41). Here bundles of grass and other materials are tied and stitched together to create all kinds of shapes and forms. This technique supported Benson’s urge to tell traditional stories or scenes from around the camp fire through arranging life-size human and animal figures in narrative sculpture groups.\(^{15}\) Once the technique and idea of grass fibre sculptures was established many artists across the region have taken to create their own objects, like Ivy Hopkins with her Wingellina Mail Plane, 2004 (Plate 16).

Fibre work also lends itself to creating projects collaboratively, a feature shared across cultures in Aboriginal Australia. In 2000 the women from Blackstone came together to make a giant two and a half metre high and five metre wide grass basket representing the Anangu weavers at the World Expo in Hannover. Another of these community projects is the life-size *Tjanpi Grass Toyota* that won the 22cnd NATSIAA in 1995. Toyota four wheel drives are not only prestigious objects in this region but they are particularly valued for providing independence for the owners to facilitate excursions to country and far away family. Money generated through art making often goes towards the purchase of such vehicles.

Collaborations in fibre art occur among Aboriginal artists and across cultures. One of these cross-cultural endeavours is the *Seven Sisters*, 2003 (Plate 17). The five Desert women involved in the negotiations for the *Seven Sisters* exhibition invited their mentors Nalda Searles and Thisbe Purich to each make one of the sisters.\(^{16}\)

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\(^{14}\) *Purnu* are wooden representations of animals or tools decorated with poker work designs.

\(^{15}\) More example of such sculpture groups are Benson’s *Eagle Story, Wati Kutjara – Two Men*, and *Bush Banana*, all made in 2003, see Ryan 2004: 76f.

\(^{16}\) Images of all *Seven Sisters* and *Wati Nyiru*, the larrikin man stalking the seven sisters, are available in Nicholls 2004.
Plate 15: Kantjupayi Bensons, Camp Crockery, 1996, native grasses, string, size unknown
Photo: Stephen Williamson, courtesy of Araluen Gallery (Kantjupayi Bensons©)

Plate 16: Ivy Hopkins, Wingellina Mail Plane, 2005, native grasses, raffia, string, wool, wood, wire, plastic, 1340 x 1335 x 470 mm.
Photo: Alice Beale, courtesy of The Western Australian Museum (Ivy Hopkins©, WAM #A26438).
In 2001 Steven Anderson and Marina Strocchi from Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, together with Thisbe Purich from Tjanpi Desert Weavers, started to incorporate fibre sculpture workshops into Batchelor’s arts program. Making free-standing grass sculptures is quite a challenge because the material needs to be stabilised enough and worked very carefully so that the sculptures are able to support themselves (Taylor n.d.). The Seven Sisters, for example, not only contain a lot of raw material, they are also very heavy because of it. Therefore, some artists use wire armatures to stabilise their figures from the inside. Working with wire, especially firm and less pliable material needed for life-size figures, also provides a challenge which led to the development of low relief sculptures. Because the sculptures are made ‘flat’ and are designed to hang on the wall the wire used can be a lot thinner which is easier to work with. According to Jenny Taylor, visual arts lecturer at Batchelor Institute, many fibre artists are also accomplished painters and working with fibre in a two-dimensional way seemed to suit. Additionally, the low relief sculpture technique also allowed for freedom of form.
Animals don’t have to stand alone and can be fantastical: dogs can have three legs or five, and long swooping tails, birds can be depicted in full flight, donkeys and camels can have huge rumps and tiny pointy feet, bush tucker shapes can be similar to those painted on canvas (Taylor n.d.).

Taylor has held a series of flat fibre sculpture workshops in Kintore, Nyrripi and other communities around Alice Springs since 2002. The artists made initial drawings of the subject. Then a wire armature was made up based on the drawing. This wire armature was covered with soft chicken wire, then with coiled grass bundles and all layers were firmly stitched together. At Nyrripi a number of women excelled in this technique, among them Dora Napurrula Long, Peggy Napurrula Poulson, Phyllis Napurrula Williams and Topsy Napurrula Fisher. The outstanding work of the latter two artists has been featured in the *ReCoil* exhibition (West 2007a, pp.80-83). Tjanpi also held a number of workshops and artists sometimes produce flat fibre sculptures, among the most prolific is probably Jean Burke (Plate 18). Siri Omberg, previous art advisor at Titjikala, introduced the idea of flat fibre sculpture to Titjikala artists after she had seen the sculptures at the Batchelor Institute. Here, a number of women have also taken this technique on board.

Plate 18: Jean Burke, Possum, 2007, desert grasses, raffia, wire, unknown.
Photo: courtesy of Tjanpi Desert Weavers, (Jean Burke©)
A central issue with the production of flat fibre sculpture seems to be the rather awkward work with the hard and prickly wire or wire mesh (Jo Foster and Jenny Taylor, pers. comm. June 2009). Many artists do not like working with wire and numerous times the arts teacher or workshop facilitator would collaborate with artists by making the wire armatures, following artists’ drawings as faithfully as possible.

An instance of cross-gender and cross-generational collaboration in fibre work occurred in 2008 amongst artists in Utopia. The Utopia Bush Medicine Project was initiated by participants in Batchelor Institute Visual Art and Own Language Work programs, assisted by Jenny Taylor, Margaret Carew and Gail Woods. The project was designed to document and consolidate knowledge about bush medicines used in the Utopia region, and to encourage the involvement of young people in learning about the medicines. In this context of cross-disciplinary workshops, fibre sculpture was seen as one medium amongst several used by people of all ages to explore and translate important cultural concepts into a tangible form, to express and transmit layers of cultural knowledge.

Participants recorded information and stories about plants, methods of gathering and preparing them, and their use as medicines for a range of ailments. Documentation took various forms: sound and video recordings (often made by young people recording their elders), spoken and written language work, drawings, etchings, and fibre sculpture. In one workshop participants made a set of drawings including an inventory of medicinal plants, their preparation and application. The drawings were then used to make 60 mono-print dry-point etchings. One of the etchings by Rosie Kunoth Ngwarray (also known as Kngwarreye) portrayed a narrative of a woman treating her sick daughter with rubbing medicine. This story *Awely Anter* was recorded and transcribed.

A subsequent workshop introduced flat fibre sculpture techniques. The artists used fibre to represent the various characters of the *Awely Anter* story (Plate 19). Younger male participants were very interested in working with wire and specialised in fashioning the armatures for the mostly female fibre artists. Then the artists had the idea to animate the fibre sculpture characters to retell the narrative as a stop-animation short film, which was included with five other short films on a DVD. The exhibition *Intem-antey anem: these things will always be*, at Araluen Galleries in 2009 featured the fibre works alongside the digital media, text, installations, and etchings about bush medicine (Jenny Taylor, pers. comm. June 2009).

Fibre work and in particular fibre sculpture allows desert women to express their cultural heritage and Aboriginal identity in a medium that suits their lifestyle. It has given them a chance to visit country and allows them to generate income independent from their partners or welfare agencies. Fibre art has become their domain, their voice and a small step in the battle against unemployment, boredom and domestic violence.

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17 The DVD is called *Intem-antey* and is available through the Batchelor Institute.
Untangling fibre connections

One of the most astonishing features of fibre art is the nature of sharing, collaboration and mentorship. Throughout the history of Aboriginal fibre artists, arts advisors and curators have worked together to reposition fibre art within the artworld and establish a sustainable market. Learning from each other and the exchange of skills, knowledge and techniques have played vital roles during this journey. It seems, therefore, rewarding to untangle the strands of connection between fibre practitioners.

One of the great exchange stories in Australian fibre art is the spread of coiling across the continent. In Western Australia Mysie Schenk, a missionary from Melbourne, introduced coiling and other fibre techniques to Wongutha women at Mt Margaret Mission in 1923 (Morgan, 1991). Similarly, the Methodist missionary Gretta Matthews learned coiling from Ngarrindjeri women when she worked at an Aboriginal mission near Adelaide and introduced it to the women on Goulbourn Island in 1922 when she continued her mission work in Arnhem Land (West 2007a: 21). Since then the coiling technique has spread along kinship networks and is now to be found all over Arnhem Land and beyond.

Exchanges between artists in workshops and collaborations have also played a great role in the transmission of knowledge and skills. Badtjala artist Fiona Foley with traditional links to Fraser Island started to visit Maningrida in 1986 and helped the arts advisor Diane Moon to organise an exchange of fibre artists from Fraser Island and Maningrida with collaborative fibre workshops in Sydney (Kleinert and Neale, 2000, p.274). Similarly, the workshops at Tandanya Aboriginal Cultural Institute and the exhibition Two Countries, One Weave brought together fibre artists from South Australia and Maningrida in 1991. Here artists realised for the first time their connection through the common coiling technique (West
2007a, p.21; Kleinert and Neale, 2000, p.372). This initial get-together led to Yvonne Koolmatrie visiting Maningrida in 1994 where she made two turtles from twined and dyed pandanus fibre based on the sister basket technique, originally from Victoria, in which two separately coiled halves are connected to construct the bag’s body.\textsuperscript{18} This technique is now used by a number of Arnhem Land artists (West 2007a, p.21). Not only techniques and ideas are exchanged but also materials like the twined bark fibre string used in Koolmatrie’s \textit{Prupi - Child stealer}, 1999 (Plate 11) has crossed hands. This string was given to her by Maningrida artists during her visit.

In the same year Arts Tasmania invited Koolmatrie to lead a six-week fibre program in a number of Tasmanian museums and art galleries which led to a strong relationship between Ngarrindjeri and Tasmanian women (Davenport-Acker and Webster 2006, p.45) who returned the visit to meet fellow artist Ellen Trevorroow at Camp Coorong in South Australia (Kleinert and Neale 2000, p.374f).

Like all artists introduced in this essay, many other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal practitioners have also become invaluable teachers and mentors. Artist Nalda Searles encouraged generations of fibre artists in Western Australia and beyond, especially within the move to sculptural forms. Since the early 1980s she has continued teaching fibre techniques in countless cross-cultural workshops. She was instrumental in kick-starting fibre practitioners in Narrogin, Perth, the Pilbara, Carnarvon and also mentors interstate. Similarly, Thisbe Purich was instrumental for the success of the Tjanpi Desert Weavers and other arts educators, like Jo Foster or Jenny Taylor, have contributed to the transmission of techniques and forms. Curators like Diane Moon and Margie West have also had a major influence in creating a sustainable market for fibre art. Moon and West were influential in positioning Aboriginal fibre art in the contemporary fine art market. Similarly, gallerists like Roslyn Premont have been at the forefront of showing new developments within Aboriginal art and fostering new artists and new genres. Premont of Gallery Gondwana (Alice Springs and Sydney) has held several exhibitions featuring newly emerging fibre sculptures from Desert communities.\textsuperscript{19} Pizzi at Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi (Melbourne) was very involved in promoting sculptural work from the Maningrida region and held the first solo show of Lena Yarinkura’s fibre sculptures.

**Conclusion**

I have shown that in widely separate geographic regions of Australia the move to ‘go sculptural’ has been successful for a number of reasons. It has brought the ancestral connection of the fibre materials and the related Dreaming stories to the foreground through the representations of the ancestral beings themselves.

\textsuperscript{18} An image of these two turtles can be seen in West 2007a: 20.
\textsuperscript{19} To list all exhibitions featuring fibre work at Gallery Gondwana would be too extensive but significant are the shows \textit{A Bird in the Hand}, 2001, and \textit{Kuka}, 2002, that introduced the flat fibre sculptures.
Inventing a new artistic genre has allowed a certain degree of freedom from cultural restrictions enabling women to represent important Dreaming stories. Creating fibre sculptures has fostered cultural identification and reconnection with cultural heritage. It has also become a means to gain some degree of independence for Aboriginal women particularly for those living in remote Australia.

The threads of fibre art reach across the continent and across cultures unlike any other medium in Aboriginal art. One reason might be that it is mainly driven by female artists and art professionals and has led to tangible female empowerment. Ideas, knowledge and skills are passed on from woman to woman. Working with fibre particularly helps Indigenous women to engage with the wider world. Many fibre projects were originally set up for their healing properties to assist the artist to focus and heal loss and addiction by providing a purposeful and fun activity with economic benefits.

Creating a new genre has freed many artists from conventions otherwise restricting their artistic expressions. In fibre sculpture they found a medium to reconnect and reinterpret their cultural heritage and express their cultural identity. The repositioning of fibre art within the wider artworld and the successful creation of a sustainable market for such work allowed fibre artists to continue their work and achieve a reasonable economic return which has helped many of them to become partly or fully independent from government welfare and instil new pride in themselves and their work.

Together the innovative artists, their excellent teachers and mentors and often visionary and tireless curators and gallerists have succeeded in making Aboriginal fibre sculpture into a genre that is as diverse as it is exciting.

Acknowledgments

I am deeply indebted to the artists for their willingness to talk or write to me about their work and for providing photos for this essay, in particular Lena Yarinkura, Treahna Hamm and Yvonne Koolmatrie. Equally valuable was the help provided to me in form of information and the search for images by Margie West, Nalda Searles, Thisbe Purich, Jo Foster, Alan Fidock and Jenny Taylor. I also would like to acknowledge the Art Gallery of NSW, Milingimbi Arts, Maningrida Arts & Culture, Tjanpi Desert Weavers, The Western Australian Museum, Araluen Gallery, the National Gallery of Victoria, and the Batchelor Institute for providing images. Invaluable have been comments on earlier drafts by Margie West and Jenny Taylor and the editing work of Moya Smith, Leigh O’Brien and my partner Ludger Dinkler.
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Clothing the postcolonial body: art, artifacts and action in south eastern Australia¹

By Sylvia Kleinert

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Abstract: In this paper I explore the significance of dress as an expressive and performative genre within contemporary art in south eastern Australia. My aim is to build on and expand recent studies in cross-cultural discourse to offer a broader, more inclusive framework for contemporary art practice in the south east grounded in dynamic Aboriginal cosmologies that demonstrate both continuity and innovation. Specifically I will examine two arenas of practice usually treated as separate domains: the revitalization of fibre seen in shell necklaces, baskets and possum skin cloaks – once worn or carried on the body - and the appropriation by artists of items of colonial and contemporary dress such as blankets, trousers, knitwear and T-shirts. My research reveals how art, as a form of action, contributes to social and cultural sustainability by engaging with an Aboriginal landscape and a postcolonial world to imagine ‘cultural futures.’

Paper

The dramatic events of February 2008 when Ngambri/Ngunnawal elder Matilda House, dressed in a possum skin cloak performed the first Indigenous ‘Welcome to Country’ for the opening of the Australian Parliament in Canberra and then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologised to the Stolen Generations, provides a key starting point for this discussion on the significance of dress in the expression and performance of Aboriginality. In recent years contemporary audiences have become increasingly familiar with these forms of cultural practice taking place across a wide range of venues in conjunction with cultural tourism, exhibition openings in galleries and museums and events such as the 2000 Sydney Olympics. As such these cultural performances provide important settings for the contemporary circulation and renegotiation of Indigenous identities (Myers, 1994). For Indigenous performers and audience participants alike this ‘culture-making’ (Myers, 1994) will inevitably be fraught with contradictions and ironies.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Selling Yarns conference National Museum of Australia 6-9 March 2009. Germane to this paper is also a paper on’ Aboriginal dress in south east Australia’ by the author in the Encyclopeadia of world dress and fashion, Berg (2010).
Nevertheless, by choosing to participate in these events on their own terms, Aboriginal Australians demonstrate the degree to which they understand and appreciate how to manipulate representations to their own advantage.

In recent studies by Maynard (2000a, 2002) and Craik (1994) dress has emerged as central to understanding how clothing ‘as the private made public’ is pivotal to the formation of individual and group identity. Dress, it is argued, has left behind its earlier association with fashion to assume greater complexity in relation to broader global concerns that encompass ethnic and cultural identities. In her research, Maynard (2002) has productively contrasted the colonial provision of government blankets - initially as a form of conciliation - with the performative use of T-shirts in public protests as a public assertion of Aboriginal identities. It becomes clear that, for an ethnic minority entangled in the uneven power relationships of a settler society, the visibility politics of clothing is crucial to understanding the representation of Aboriginal identities within the wider framework of nation state.

Aboriginality itself is crucial to this debate. Once defined in fixed essentialising terms, cultural identity is today seen as ‘subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power’ (Hall, 1990, p 225). Identity in this sense is ‘a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being”’ (Hall, 1990, p 225). Thus cultural identity arises from an Aboriginal cosmology that demonstrates both continuity and innovation. In using the term innovation, I am not referring to a modernist aesthetic of originality and individual expression. Rather, I draw upon recent studies in cross cultural discourse (Morphy, 2008; Dodson, 2003; Glowczewski, 1999; Ginsburg and Myers, 2006) in which Aboriginal cosmologies are defined in terms of continuities and discontinuities: concerned with the future as much as the past (Hall, 1990, p 225). Thus Aboriginal culture follows its own distinctive trajectories (Morphy, 2008), re-connecting with the past and creating new representations, engaged in spiritual, moral and political terms both with an Aboriginal landscape and a postcolonial world. By considering the significance of dress as an expression of identity and difference and as a means of engaging in dialogue with a settler society, this essay argues that the visual politics of clothing offers a broader, more inclusive understanding of contemporary Aboriginal art in south eastern Australia. Specifically it shows how art, as a form of action, contributes to social and cultural sustainability by reconnecting with the past and resignifying in a postcolonial world to imagine cultural futures (Ginsburg & Myers, 2006)

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2 Morphy (2008, p 194) argues that accepting Aboriginal art as Indigenous modernism imposes constraints which set Aboriginal art on an alternative trajectory determined by the modernist concern with innovation and originality. When Aboriginal art is celebrated for its hybridity, this redirects the interpretation of Aboriginal art away from its own Indigenous trajectory.
Postcolonial bodies

Dress carries particular resonance in south eastern Australia where two centuries of colonisation have impacted on Aborigines. In the south east Aboriginal Australians were subject to unrelenting colonisation, devastated by disease and violence, dispossessed from traditional lands and relegated to remote missions and reserves. With colonisation Europeans brought their own understandings of dress as part of the civilizing process of modern society: the adoption of clothing codes was linked to class, gender and social mores which they proceeded to impose on Aboriginal people. A crucial aspect of colonisation was the emphasis given to clothing as a mark of civilization. Maynard argues that the ‘absence of clothing has been regarded dialectically as a lack of, or sign of, that which exists outside the civilized’ (Maynard 2002, p 191). Thus clothing explicitly circulates in the discourses of fear and admiration generated by a primitive Other. To remedy this situation, colonial officials dispensed government clothing with the result that, in the first decades of settlement, traditional clothing had almost completely disappeared. Nevertheless it should not be assumed that the dramatic interventions of colonisation, meant an unequivocal acceptance of European dress. As I discuss elsewhere, what emerges is an uneven and yet complex process of social mediation across various exchange systems where clothing served a range of interpretative possibilities within competing local, cultural and political agendas (Kleinert, 2010).

In reality Aboriginal people in south eastern Australia had long been incorporated within global processes. From the earliest arrival of European explorers, Aboriginal artifacts were traded as part of cross cultural exchange - widely admired and sought after as exotic curiosities. By the mid-nineteenth century the collections amassed by R. E. Johns would eventually be acquired by Museum Victoria, but the basis of these collections was European: Johns sourced objects from other collections, friends and family and salerooms but not directly from Aboriginal people (Griffiths, 1996, pp 28-54; Morphy, 1998, pp 319-320). Hence these artifacts entered museum collections with little understanding of their Indigenous context and their intrinsic value for Aboriginal people. Meanwhile Aborigines continued to produce artifacts such as boomerangs, baskets and possum skin cloaks for exchange and for sale to dealers and tourists. By the late nineteenth century however, anthropologists came to the belief that traditional culture no longer survived in the south eastern Australia and as a consequence, these hybrid objects were dismissed as inauthentic tourist souvenirs (Phillips & Steiner, 1999; Morphy, 2008).

This study is focused on the contemporary artistic expression which emerged in the south east during the 1970s and 1980s. With the repeal of discriminatory and oppressive legislation in favour of policies that promoted self-determination, a new Aboriginal art movement emerged in the capital cities inspired by the Black Power movement in Northern America and emerging pan-Aboriginal Land Rights. Lin Onus (1948-1996), who led the genesis of a new Koorie art movement in Melbourne, recalled the ‘new class’ of Aboriginal people who
emerged to public attention in the late 1960s: ‘Many were young, many were articulate, but they were all angry’ (Onus, 1993, p 290). At the time a number of important exhibitions like Koori Art ‘84 at Artspace in Sydney played a seminal role in bringing artists together. Subsequently Aboriginal controlled organizations began to emerge such as Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative established in 1987 by a group of young Aboriginal art students to provide a network of support for young artists through a gallery space and exhibitions such as True Colours (1994-5) and Blakness: Blak City Culture (1994-5) which began to redefine Aboriginality.

It was not until the 1980s however that a parallel renaissance occurred among Aboriginal women in the south east. In the catalogue for the groundbreaking Aboriginal Women’s Exhibition in 1991 Indigenous writer Henrietta Fourmile (1991, pp 4-5) identified several reasons for this delay: a patriarchal bias on the part of anthropologists who failed to acknowledge Aboriginal women’s complementary role in society; art/craft debates which relegated women’s practice to the anonymous realm of craft and the impact of Aboriginal stereotypes which dismissed Aborigines in the south east as having ‘lost’ their culture by comparison with ‘real’ Aborigines in northern Australia. In response, she argued, women preferred to focus on the production of traditional fibre items such as baskets, shell necklaces and printed textiles. Thus contrasts can be drawn between the tough, oppositional art of the cities where (male) painters predominated and the revitalisation of an intercultural and collaborative fibre practice through workshops and exchange programs led by senior women located in small, sometimes relatively isolated rural communities. Indicative of the emerging fine art status of fibre practice is the inclusion of Ngarrindjeri artist Yvonne Koolmatrie’s eel traps in Fluent, the 1997 Venice Biennale, alongside the paintings of Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Judy Watson and, in 2005, the

3 Key exhibitions are: Women’s art exhibition (1991); Women’s Work: Aboriginal women’s artifacts in the Museum of Victoria (1992); Tactility: Two centuries of Indigenous objects, textiles and fibre (2003); Twined together: Kunmadj njalehnjaleken (2005); Woven forms: contemporary basket making in Australia, (2005) and Recoil: change and exchange in coiled fibre art (2007).

4 The research of Lesley McCall (1988) confirms the androcentric bias in the Museum Victoria collection.

5 West points out that, in addition to funding from the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council for the Arts, the Crafts Council of Australia also directed funds toward the development of Indigenous programs and exchanges in Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia (2007, p 13).

6 For example in Koori Art ‘84 of the nineteen ‘urban’ Aboriginal artists represented only five are women. However these gender distinctions may also be an effect of Western categories. In European art history the category of craft is directly connected with women (Parker 1984) whereas there is ample evidence of men’s contemporary and historical involvement in fibre practice (Mellor & Hamby, 2000; Wood-Conroy, 2000).

7 See, for example, Two Countries: One Weave (1992) which bought together Ngarrindjeri women from the Riverland region of South Australia and women from Maningrida in Arnhem Land (Mellor & Hamby, 2000, pp 372-373). Exchanges have occurred since through the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in Alice Springs, and Tennant Creek and through workshops in the Western Desert and Western Australia (West, 2007, pp 24- 25, 31, 45)
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prizewinning almost life-size *Tjanpi Grass Toyota* created by women from Blackstone community, Western Australia for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award.

Recent studies in cross cultural discourse (Morphy, 2008; Myers, 1994; Philips & Steiner, 1999) have explored the way in which anthropological and art historical categories of art/artifact and art/craft have consistently defined Aboriginal art in European terms. In charting the shift from primitive art to contemporary Indigenous art, their insights demonstrate the way in which processes of value creation have generated national and international recognition for Aboriginal art. But the problem is that the majority of this writing and related exhibitions is focused on northern Australia — in effect, reinforcing colonial discourses of race and culture (Gibson, 2008; Allen & Greeno, 2005, p 17). Since the 1970s, the development of acrylic dot painting in Central Australia has contributed to this separation, enhancing the status of Aboriginal art and culture as a unique symbol of national identity. Although the remote/urban dichotomy has been questioned, it is clear that for Aborigines in the south east, the effect and experience of these colonial categories can be internalised as a sense of loss and expressed as a profound ambivalence (Gibson, 2008). Nevertheless it is important to acknowledge the diversity of Aboriginal experiences in relation to particular geographic, historical and material circumstances and generational differences. We need to acknowledge that Aboriginality proceeds through a complex repertoire of critical strategies and articulations ‘at times ancient, at times subversive, at times oppositional, at times secret, at times shifting’ (Dodson cited by Grossman 2003, p 5).

This study aims to build on and expand cross cultural discourse in relation to contemporary Aboriginal art in south eastern Australia. In the following section I will begin by examining some of the objects —once worn or carried on the body— produced in the revival of fibre practice before looking at the appropriation of European items of dress by city-based artists. Obviously I in no way suggest that these two strands do justice to the complexity and diversity of contemporary art practice in the south. Rather I argue for a broader, more inclusive understanding of contemporary Aboriginal art in the south east. While each strand appears to be a discrete domain with its own distinctive trajectories, in reality, this separation is the outcome of deeply entrenched Western categories which have served to mask the many commonalities and interconnections —expressive of an integrated and holistic Aboriginal worldview.

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8 Morphy (2008, p 12) argues that ‘Art as a category is deeply entangled in value creation processes. Since the eighteenth century, the category of fine art has been used to exclude recognition for other art forms.’

9 The loss felt in relation to development is not of course restricted to south east Australia. See Merlan (1989).
Renewal and revitalisation

Since the 1970s with the greater freedom offered by policies of self-determination, Aborigines across south eastern Australia embarked on a remarkable process of cultural revival in language, law and culture. Driven by an imperative need to redress a sense of loss and elation at the opportunity to re-engage with the past these cultural revivals have assumed various forms: re-connecting with Country, establishing relationships with remote communities and participating in workshops and exchange programs. Nevertheless there is a sense in which these cultural revivals are frequently misunderstood and may be read by the wider community in potentially damaging ways as a fabrication or an illusion of identity (Gibson, 2008; Kuper, 2003). Therefore there is a pressing need for studies like that undertaken here which examine the way in which cultural revivals proceed. Far from being a mere replication of the past, cultural revivals involve a complex process of recreation and transformation, proceeding by way of memory and history and narratives of identity and experience that carry political, moral and cultural force.

Fibre has always played a central role in the productive activity of Aboriginal Australians. Across the south east, plant and animal-based fibres were spun and coiled into structures that fulfilled a diverse range of functions in both spiritual and material terms.

In many cases items of dress encoded complex meanings as markers of individual identity in relation to social hierarchies, age and gender. For instance, a possum skin cloak used as protection against inclement weather, to carry weapons and for women to carry babies, also served as a marker of individual and group identity. In death, as in life, the individual’s possum skin cloak, together with other personal items such as woven baskets, tools and food, ensured a safe return of the spirit to the ancestral domain. Drawings by Wurundjeri artist, William Barak, depict men dancing in ceremony wearing cloaks like a protective mantle accompanied by women seated with clap sticks and possum skin cloaks rolled tightly across their knees as drums. For Aborigines, the creativity and effort involved in the production of these items was invested with intense meanings as part of a hunter-gatherer lifestyle with its own well established exchange relations. Despite the lack of interest on the part of institutions and their exclusion from discourses of Aboriginality, Aborigines in southeastern Australia never ceased to be involved in the cultural production of items such as boomerangs and baskets. Aborigines in the south east express concern with ‘keeping culture’: in the process of transmitting the knowledge and skills required to gather and prepare materials and create a boomerang or basket, children learn respect for Elders, listen to the stories of their people and gain access to their cultural heritage.

Under the impact of assimilation policies - in place for the better part of the twentieth century – government policies sought to erase cultural life. In relaying their historical experiences Aboriginal people recall being punished for speaking
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language and passing on skills and knowledge. Unsurprisingly many Aboriginal people chose not to pass on their cultural knowledge. Yet Aboriginal culture survived. Gundidjmaara woman Connie Hart (1917-1993) recalls that ‘No one taught me to make my baskets. I used to watch my mother do it … My Mum told me that we were coming into the white people’s way of living. So she wouldn’t teach us’ (Griffiths, 1996, pp 279-281). However forty years later, after her mother had died, Connie Hart felt free to make her first basket and later conducted workshops at the Hamilton Keeping Place in western Victoria. Likewise the cultural revival of Ngarrindjeri weaving can be attributed to the initiative of a single custodian, Doreen Kartinyeri (1935-2007) who, in 1982, established workshops at Raukkan (Point McLeay) and Menindie for the Ngarrindjeri of the Lower Murray, the Coorong and Lake Alexandrina region of South Australia. Yvonne Koolmatrie and Ellen Trevorrow attended these workshops and each went on to a distinctive career.

Plate 1: Lola Greeno, Untitled Shell necklace, 2006, maireener and oat shells. 180cm in length, Reproduced with permission of the artist

In Tasmania, where Trucanini (Truganini) stands as an ironic symbol of colonial narratives of extinction, the continuous production of shell necklaces is cause for great celebration (Greeno ,2006). (Plate 1) Such steadfast cultural continuity in the face of genocide testifies to the resilience of Aboriginal Tasmanians. For women living in exile on Flinders Island, the production of shell necklaces represented an important means of economic survival, sold or bartered to provide food and clothing for their families. Yet, even today, the complex knowledge and skills required to make shell necklaces are tightly held, a precious secret restricted to certain key families and passed down from one generation to another from mother to daughter. Using long strands of up to almost two metres in length, the artists create distinctive patterns from various types of shells collected from different sites. Today the shell necklaces fulfill multiple roles that traverse public and private domains. In homes, necklaces draped over family photographs offer
a symbol of love and protection; in a public context, they feature in ceremonies, in workshops and in the community festivals *putalina* and *larapuna* (Greeno, 2006, p 54). With emerging fine art status, contemporary shell necklaces, whose brilliant shimmer brings comparison with northern Australia (Morphy, 1992), are today highly sought after as prestigious items commissioned by private and institutional collections.

Nevertheless as objects traverse the colonial categories of art/artifact and art/craft tensions and ambiguities inevitably arise. Lindy Allen and Lola Greeno writing in a catalogue essay for the exhibition *Woven Forms: Contemporary Basket Making in Australia*, examine the range of productive activity in contemporary fibre practice and its critical response. They draw contrasts between the work of senior custodians, who produce ‘cultural pieces’ (like the coiled ‘sister baskets’ unique to the south east)\(^{10}\) which may have personal, historical and cultural resonance and the production of individual and expressive objects that are seen to ‘push the boundaries of the medium’ (Allen & Greeno, 2005, p 19).\(^{11}\) The upshot is that the ‘cultural pieces’ where the artist has followed historical templates are relegated to the museum while the more individual work is applauded and given considerable recognition as an artwork ‘which only ever allows a one-dimensional, aesthetic judgment’ (Allen & Greeno, 2005, pp 20-21). It is clear from this discussion how the value judgments implemented through Western categories and market forces impact on the effect and experience of contemporary fibre practice. But in the process, as Howard Morphy points out (2008, p 194), tradition and innovation are located in opposition, in effect creating two separate categories.\(^{12}\) An alternative viewpoint would argue that within Aboriginal cosmology there exists both continuity and innovation. From this perspective both ‘cultural pieces’ and art works contribute to cultural cohesion and sustainability by rebuilding communities and by gaining recognition for a dynamic and resilient Aboriginal presence. Above all these somatic objects resonate in relation to an Aboriginal landscape in terms of their texture and smell, their connection to people and place and to an ancestral

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\(^{10}\) An historical precedence exists for the transfer and exchange of fibre techniques. In 1922 missionary Gretta (Margaret) Mathews, who had previously learned coiling from Ngarrindjeri women, introduced the coiling technique to the Methodist Mission at Goulburn Island (Warruwi) (West, 2007, pp 14-15; Mellor and Hamby 2000).

\(^{11}\) In tracing the history of the efflorescence in fibre art, West observes that support by the Craft Council of Australia focused on ‘adapted’ craft rather than ‘customary’ weaving (2007, p 13). It is interesting to note that in *Recoil* (2007), two of the most innovative fibre artists in the south east are included, but no ‘customary’ weaving.

\(^{12}\) As Nicholas Thomas argues ‘Curators... and anthropologists have become notorious for fetishizing traditional culture to the exclusion of those cultures’ historically adapted and innovative expressions’ (Thomas, 1999, p 197). Thomas succinctly captures the way in which western discourses sustain an apparent opposition between a reified tradition and innovation. He continues: ‘The significance and effects of Indigenous art can only be misunderstood if we insist on celebrating either the so-called ‘traditionalist’ expressions or the ‘contemporary’ ones instead of acknowledging both’ (Thomas, 1999, p 199).
domain embodied in the repeated actions of gathering and preparing the reeds and grasses, and proficient use of their hands to weave aesthetically attractive objects (Lamb, 1996, p 53).\textsuperscript{13}

Plate 2: Lorraine Connelly-Northey, An O’possum - skin Cloak, 2005-6, rusted corrugated iron, wire, 119.5 x 131.5 x 5.0 cm. Collection: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

Thus cultural renewals may take many forms. In 1993, a workshop at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston initiated a revival in fibre practice including the tradition of kelp water carriers unique to Tasmania. While many artists continue to make grass baskets and kelp water carriers following traditional models, Vicki West transforms the bull kelp that grows around the rugged shoreline of the island into an entirely new object. West observes that ‘Lots of my work is about the survival of culture and celebrating that survival –

\textsuperscript{13} Lamb (1996, p 53) and West (2007) provide an insight into Koolmatrie’s engagement with the landscape. As Yvonne Koolmatrie says, ‘I’m very close to the river [the Murray] although I come from the Coorong... I couldn’t survive without water. It's beautiful, it inspires me. I go through all the sites: the middens, canoe trees, the burial sites. I care for the land and the people who have been here. They’ve walked along the banks and pulled rushes where I’m pulling them and it just inspires me’ (West, 2007, p 95).
past, present and future’ (Reynolds, 2006, p 43). Like a piece of armour, hand sewn and improvised to meet an unforeseen enemy, West's *Kelp Armour* (2003) apparently bears the scars of battle, shot through and shredded to ribbons. As such it is a powerful reminder of the guerilla warfare staged by Tasmanian people, effectively undoing the settler colonial myth that Aboriginal people simply melted away before the tide of civilization, or were decimated by illness, thereby whitewashing the violent battles in which Aborigines engaged. In *Kelp Armour* West draws creatively upon the heritage of her people but she is also operating counter-discursively, challenging authorised versions of colonial history.

An alternative political reality acknowledges that Aborigines and non-Aborigines live in a shared co-existence within a settler colonial society (Kleinert, 2002). For Wiradjuri artist Lorraine Connelly-Northey it is a relationship to be negotiated. Since 2002 she has recreated the string bags, possum skin cloaks and coolamons of an earlier era but in alternative materials, using the industrial detritus of the modern world: rusted iron, barbed wire and coils of wire. (Plate 2) In so doing she seeks to pay respect to both her mother's Indigenous connections with Country and her father's Irish descent, living on the land following a vernacular tradition of making do and improvisation. Born in Swan Hill, Lorraine Connelly-Northey initially worked in Adelaide and attended a workshop with renowned weaver Yvonne Koolmatrie. But she did not want to follow Koolmatrie by working in a traditional style of weaving and, as a Wiradjuri woman, she was not comfortable using local *cummbungi* grasses out of respect for the traditional owners, the Wemba Wemba (Murray, 2003). Artistically, Lorraine Connelly-Northey aims to do something distinctive and different - something innovative that really stands out (Connelly-Northey, 2009). Like Lena Yarinkura from Buldkdjam in Arnhem Land who has gained renown for her *Yawkyawk* (Mermaid) figures, Lorraine Connelly-Northey wants to be innovative. The trajectory on which she is embarked is engaged in the effort of reworking discarded materials to create objects of great beauty - artworks that speak of being both black and white, taking from both to create a future imaginary.

The recent revival of possum skin cloaks by four young artists Lee Darroch, Treahna Hamm and Vicki and Debra Couzens born in the 1960s and 1970s, provides further evidence of the complexities entailed in cultural revival (Reynolds, 2005). (Plates 3 & 4) In 1999 the four artists embarked upon a project to reproduce the two remaining possum skin cloaks in Australia held in the Museum Victoria collection: the Lake Condah cloak collected in 1872 and the Maiden’s Punt (Echuca) cloak collected in 1853. With reproduction came considerable responsibility. With due respect for cultural protocols the artists engaged in consultation with elders in the relevant communities concerning the cultural significance of the cloaks, the meaning of the geometric and figurative

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14 The remaining four cloaks and one engraved possum skin pelt are in collections overseas (Reynolds, 2005, p 62 fn 1).

15 The project which included possum skin cloaks and prints was funded by the National Museum of Australia. The artists named the project *Tooloyn Koortakay* or ‘squaring the skins for rugs.’
designs etched inside the cloaks and the story telling they generated. Even then the process of reproduction raised unforeseen problems which required adjustments and modifications. Where elements of the design were missing from the fragile cloaks, the artists embarked upon research using ethnographic records. Being a protected species, Australian possums were unavailable so the artists used New Zealand possum skins. The chemicals used to treat these skins also required poker work to be substituted for the original shell engraving and ochre. The differences between the originals and the reproductions - encompassing a gap of over 150 years - are clearly evident: while the original cloaks carry a layered patina of age and ochre, the parchment-like quality and crisp designs of the new cloaks speak of a cultural future. Yet both involve a marking of skin repeating the same geometric and figurative designs that signified individual and group identity once found in body cicatrices, carved wooden artifacts and dendroglyphs (carved trees only found in the southeast) associated with burial sites.

Plate 3: Aunty Matilda House and Lee Darroch, Possum Skin Cloak Workshop, Selling Yarns 2, NMA, 8 March 2009. Photograph: Elena Green.
For the artists concerned, the project represented a journey of self-discovery, a revival of traditions and a gift to future generations (Reynolds, 2005, pp 47-58). Yet there are differences. Lee Darroch and Treahna Hamm speak of the way the cloak-making project resignified a cultural identity denied by the 2002 findings of the Yorta Yorta Native Title claim. In the words of Treahna Hamm, ‘One of the judges said the tide of history has washed away our culture. We know very well that it hasn’t and we’re just living proof of that’ (Reynolds, 2005, p 50).  

16 Commonwealth legislation for Land Rights was passed in 1976 allowing some Northern Territory land to be claimed. Subsequently the Mabo judgment in 1993 recognized Aboriginal native title followed by the Wik judgment of 1996 which found that the grant of pastoral leases did not extinguish native title. However the Howard Government’s ‘Ten Point Plan’ implemented legislation to the Native Title Act in 1998 curtailing the impact of these judgments. In the south east, militancy for land rights resulted in the return of traditional lands at Lake Tyers and Framlingham reserves in 1971 and further small parcels of land at Lake Condah in 1985. In 1993 the Yorta Yorta people filed a
Gundidjmara artist Debra Couzens, involvement in the project ‘was the start of a journey for learning about my Grandmother’s Country Lake Condah way and …[this then] took in a lot of sacred sites …and I understood a lot more about …the Convincing Ground’ – a Gundidjmara massacre site (Reynolds, 2005, p 47). What these artists tell us is the importance of the cloak- making project as a form of action. For Indigenous writer Bruce Pascoe, the cloak- making project is ‘removing some of our cataracts’(Pascoe, 2007, p 173), ensuring that the hidden history of the south east – both its rich cultural heritage and the genocide and loss of sovereignty which has taken place – is known to a younger generation of Aboriginal Australians and the wider community.

Of course such projects would not be possible without the active support of museums – including Aboriginal controlled organisations like the Koorie Heritage Trust17 and the new policies of collection and display implemented in recent years. A series of exhibitions - replete with story telling by elders, cultural performances and films - ensured that the making of the possum skin cloaks would expand into a wider domain. 18

Under the auspices of Regional Arts Victoria, thirty-five cultural language groups across the state worked with the four artists to each create a possum skin cloak. When, in March 2006, community leaders wore these possum skin cloaks before a worldwide audience at the opening of the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne, they performatively used the cloaks as an expression of cultural identity. Fred Myers reminds us that this process of ‘culture-making’ is central to the process of ‘becoming Aboriginal’ where art is used as a form of action to redefine and ‘gain value from the circumstances that confront them’ (Myers, 1994, p 680). By engaging in a ‘theatre of history’ where the dialogue of cross cultural exchange occurs, such social and symbolic actions bring with them the possibility of social change.

One hundred years ago residents at Coranderrk near Melbourne participated in a somewhat similar event. In 1863, soon after the establishment of Coranderrk, a deputation led by ngurungaeta Simon Wonga attended a Governor’s levee in Melbourne. On this occasion the men wore European clothes, they were wrapped in possum skin cloaks and carried spears (Attwood, 2003, pp 15-16, 19; Lydon, 2005, p 40) demonstrating that they well understood the importance of representations. Today possum skin cloaks might well be seen as fulfilling much the same roles as they have done in an earlier era: as markers of individual

land claim however in his final deliberation Justice Howard Olney rejected the claim on the grounds that ‘The tide of history has indeed washed away any real acknowledgement of their traditional laws and any real observance of their traditional customs’ (Broome, 2005, p 382). Following an appeal this judgment was upheld in 2002. Subsequently various cultural language groups have since negotiated title to parcels of land (Broome, 2005, pp 345-348; pp 379-382).

17 The establishment of the Koorie Heritage Trust in 1985 by Gundidjmara man Jim Berg arose out of concern for the repatriation of Aboriginal skeletal remains. The Koorie Heritage Trust now has a major collection and an exhibition space (Broome, 2005, p 386).

18 These exhibitions included: Biganga: Keeping Tradition (Barmah Forest Possum Skin Cloak) (2005-6) at Bunjilaka, Museum Victoria and Gunya Winya (Women’s Cloaks) (2005) at the Koorie Heritage Trust, Melbourne.
and community identity, pivotal in welcoming and repatriation ceremonies, in the recovery of family histories and in the intergenerational transmission of knowledge.

It is clear that cultural revivals are never just a replication of the past but a complex process of regeneration and recreation where the past is retold in the present. As such this productive activity demonstrates its transformative potential to rebuild communities and mediate with the wider public. While these artworks may fulfill multiple roles, above all they resonate as somatic objects that embody subjectivities between people and place and narratives of identity relayed across intergenerational time through long standing experience and the hand skills of creative labour.

**Protesting the colonial hegemony**

I turn now to the second strand of this paper, the appropriation of colonial and European clothing by Aboriginal artists working in more urbanised settings. These artists also seek to reconnect with the past as a means of asserting identity and difference, by re-establishing connections with Country and by interrogating the past to address its unresolved histories. Specifically these urban artists use colonial and European dress, in addition to Indigenous dress, to give historical resonance to past events and make explicit the power relations between Aboriginal people and the nation state.

Items of dress are a recurring feature in the work of Badtjala artist Fiona Foley. Working in printmaking, photography and installation, Foley uses the visibility politics of clothing to address issues of race and representation, gender relations and colonisation. Foley’s cultural connections are to the Thoorgine people of Frazer Island and nearby Hervey Bay in Queensland. In 1987 as a young art student in Sydney she was a founding member of the Boomallli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative but in 1995 she returned to Hervey Bay to contribute to a Native Title claim and to participate in family life. The photographic series *Badtjala Woman* (1994) directly intervenes in discourses of Aboriginality. Foley re-presents herself as the subject matter of an archival photograph: eyes averted and naked to the waist. In one photograph she wears a reed necklace and another made of shells and she carries a twined basket, traditionally used by women for carrying food, with string handles across her forehead. Foley deliberately mimics the pose of her anonymous Badtjala forebears, dressed according to ethnographic stereotypes to represent an exotic Other. In so doing she invokes the racially inscribed body as the foundation of colonial discourses that divide primitive and civilized.

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19 See, for example, the repatriation in 2003 of the DjadjaDjadja baby initially collected from a tree trunk near Charlton in 1904 together with grave goods which had been sprinkled with ochre and wrapped in a possum skin cloak and an array of Aboriginal and European items (Buckell, 2003).
Blankets are another recurring feature in Foley’s installations but they come freighted with darker, historical meanings.\textsuperscript{20} From 1816 onwards government distribution of blankets and slops (basic dress of a generic kind) to Aboriginal people began under Governor Macquarie. The distribution of blankets continued throughout the south east until well into the twentieth century initially as a form of coercion and to achieve reconciliation and later as a charitable and paternalistic gesture. Once highly desired by Aborigines, when animal skins were no longer available, blankets came to be seen as a symbol of colonial generosity and a means of bargaining with government authorities. Over time, however, government-issue blankets have come to be seen more ambivalently in relation to the tensions and terror of colonial history (Maynard, 1994, pp 65-66). In Foley’s Land Deal (1995) installed at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, a spiral created from 50 kilograms of flour takes centre stage. (Plate 5) Installed on the walls of the gallery are the pioneering artefacts and trinkets given in exchange for land: blankets, knives, beads, scissors, mirrors and tomahawks, objects associated with colonial welfare, the disease and death that followed European settlement and the unequal exchange of land.\textsuperscript{21} Foley is a witness to history (Healy, 2003). Specifically the installation refers to the infamous

\textsuperscript{20} In another installation, \textit{Stud Gins} (2003) text printed on a row of blankets gives voice to the exploitation of Aboriginal women both on colonial frontier and in Christian missions.

\textsuperscript{21} A second related installation \textit{Lie of the Land} (1977) took the form of sandstone blocks almost three metres high engraved on both sides with the names of the articles given in exchange and installed in front of Melbourne Town Hall in Swanston Street.
Batman Treaty - the only Treaty ever offered to Aboriginal people, on 6 June 1835 between John Batman of the Port Philip Association and Kulin people of Central Victoria, and ultimately rejected by imperial and colonial governments. Foley includes the text of the treaty as part of the installation thereby making a ‘pertinent and confronting’ connection with the land claim of her particular clan group (Davidson, 1997).

Likewise the work of Julie Gough, a Trawlwoolway Tasmanian artist and writer, addresses unresolved colonial histories. In her installation *We ran/ I am* (2007) (Plate 6) Gough re-enacts the 1831 ‘Black Line’ - a genocidal event in Tasmanian history when military, police and settlers attempted to clear the settled districts of Tasmanian Aboriginal people (Ryan, 1996, pp 109-113, 145-159). Gough’s installation includes historical maps, archival documents and photographic documentation. Text from the Journal of the Aboriginal Protector, George Augustus Robinson, written on 3 November 1830 at Swan Island, north east Tasmania, included as part of the installation, serves to remind us of the ambiguous and potentially treacherous role that clothing might fulfill in such colonial events:

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22 Senior Kulin understood the Treaty not as a purchase of land but in relation to local *tanderrum* or welcoming ceremonies and in subsequent years the expected reciprocity took the form of feasts and gifts of brass plates, blankets, flour, rice and sugar (Broome, 2005, pp 10-11: Attwood, 2003, p 6).

23 The Black Line marked the end of the guerilla warfare waged by Aboriginal people which had successfully halted the progress of colonial settlement (Ryan, 1996, pp 110-112).
I issued slops to all the fresh natives, gave them baubles and played the flute, and rendered them as satisfied as I could. The people all seemed satisfied at their clothes. Trousers is [sic] excellent things and confines their legs so they cannot run (Gough, 2007).

The installation documents Gough running through the landscape at seven sites on the Black Line (now overlain with modern development) replaying and reprocessing the acts of capture and escape. As part of the installation Gough includes the trousers she wore. Reenactment thus forms a key component in the installation, a metaphor for the resilience of Aboriginal Tasmanians. As Gough says, ‘survival has come from an ability to swerve or deftly accommodate change’ (Gough, 2007). As such, the action of running and the trousers worn are shared witnesses to past and present.

Aborigines in south eastern Australia can demonstrate a long history of involvement with petitions, walk-offs and protests in their political struggles for equality and recognition. But in the contemporary era, dress has assumed new force as an expression of identity and difference. Since the 1970s and 1980s the T-shirt has emerged as a ubiquitous item of clothing co-opted by indigenous groups worldwide as a visible assertion of individual identity and a public display of group solidarity. Margaret Maynard (2000a) points out the way in which the T-shirt could be deployed as a form of clothing in the public display of Aboriginality as an expression of pride, anger or sorrow at events such as the Black Protest Committee against the Commonwealth Games in Brisbane 1982, the celebration of the Uluru hand over in 1985, Invasion Day 1988 in Sydney in protest against the bicentennial celebrations and as an expression of mourning for Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. One memorable photograph from the Invasion Day 1988 march by artist and curator Brenda Croft depicts Michael Watson wearing face paint, a headband inscribed with ‘We have survived’ and a T-shirt emblazoned with the Aboriginal flag and the words ‘Cook Who Cook-oo’- an ironic comment on the historical figure at the centre of the bicentenary celebrations.

At the heart of identity politics lie issues of race and representation that sustain and support Aboriginal stereotypes. The knitwear created by Bidjarra artist Christian Thompson and shown as part of the Blaks Palace series in his 2002 solo exhibition during Melbourne Fashion week, refers directly to stereotypes of Aboriginality. (Plate 7) Thomson displays the jumpers in various contexts, re-housed in display cases like museum exhibits or worn with aplomb by Indigenous models such as academic Marcia Langton who shares a regional heritage with Christian Thomson (Croft, 2003, p 6, 8). Thomson directly targets the work of 1970s and 1980s designers Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson who produced fashions, printed fabrics and knitwear for their boutique Flamingo Park in Sydney (Maynard, 2000b). Using images of the kangaroo and boomerang, Thompson addresses the way in which Aboriginal art and culture is marketed as a unique symbol of Australia. However the design of the jumper with its
strange color combinations and impossibly long sleeves – both a literal as well as metaphorical straitjacket (Croft, 2003, p 8) challenges existing ideas of Aboriginality.

As we have seen these city-based artists incorporate from both traditional Indigenous dress and European dress as subject matter for their art. These artworks, as a form of action, contribute to social and cultural sustainability by rebuilding communities, by intervening as a witness to history and by challenging representations of Aboriginality.
Conclusion

In conclusion, what is striking is the significance of dress as a metaphor for the relationship between Aborigines and the nation state. Following two centuries of colonisation dress has assumed particular significance for Aboriginal people in south east Australia. As the subject matter of art it provides both a direct connection with an Aboriginal landscape and a means of interrogating a postcolonial world.

As somatic objects, the items of dress considered in this study are transformative as an expression of identity and difference and a means of mediating with a settler society. Viewed from within Aboriginal cosmologies grounded in continuity and innovation, the past becomes a referent for the present. That past refers to both the rich, sentient cultural heritage of an Aboriginal landscape and to the events of colonial history: the genocide, loss of sovereignty and cultural destruction for which there is little recognition in the wider community (Pascoe, 2007, p 173; Ginsburg & Myers, 2006, p 35). In so doing, art as a form of action, contributes to social and cultural sustainability in many ways: as a means of connecting with cultural heritage; a means of addressing the unresolved histories of colonial history and a means self-performatively taking control of representations. Seen in relational and processual terms, art is a means of intervening in discourses of Aboriginality, engaged in the effort of imagining a future conceived of in moral terms (Pascoe, 2007, p 79).

In this study I have considered two discrete strands within contemporary art practice in the south east: an urban-based Aboriginal art seen as political and oppositional and a rural-based collaborative and intercultural women's fibre practice focused on cultural renewal. While each discrete strand reveals a particular character and style, my study has also revealed their many commonalities grounded in interconnected and holistic Aboriginal cosmologies. In the south east, as in other parts of Australia, art is a form of action that is central to culture-making: affirmative, mediating, exploratory and contestational.

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Outsourcing the hand: An analysis of craft-design collaborations across the global divide

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Abstract: This paper identifies a growing trend in contemporary craft practice which involves outsourcing handmade processes to artisans in poorer countries. To evaluate this process, it reviews three case studies: Sara Thorns Worldwide Weave in India, Polly&Me in Pakistan, and Martina Dempf in Rwanda. Each enables different levels of creative collaboration with traditional artisans. While a critical framework is able to be established, there is still a lack of information that comes directly from the artisans themselves.

Introduction

This paper explores the continuing voice of craft as a critic of modernity that draws from non-Western cultures for inspiration. This has become an increasing politicised position in recent years. In response, world craft projects have highlighted the more collaborative dimension of production. But what is the nature of collaboration when it involves parties from radically unequal parts of the world?

Since the nineteenth century, craft in the West has been associated with opposition to modernity. Studio craftspersons looked for inspiration to other cultures that were innocent of the alienation found in the West (de Waal, 2002). Through non-western cultures it was possible to re-connect with the spiritual dimension of work, particularly its basis in the natural world.

In time, this engagement has become less spiritual. A feature of globalisation in the post-war era is the lengthening of supply chains. This is particularly evident in manufacturing, where much factory work has been outsourced to countries such as China. Recently, a new form of cultural outsourcing has emerged in which the non-West is not merely a source of inspiration, but also actual ‘hands-on’ craft labour. What are the terms of this engagement and what does this say about the place of craft in modernity?
The Arts & Crafts Movement was inspired by a reaction against modernity. As William Morris pronounced in his 1894 lecture ‘How I became a socialist’, ‘Apart from the desire to create beautiful things the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization’ (Morris, 1980, p. 36). Morris thus turned away from the grimy industrial Victorian England to idealised versions of pre-modernity, such as medieval England. In terms of his own time, it was the Nordic cultures, particularly Iceland, which provided inspiration through his own travel.¹

In the 20th century, inspiration for the craft movement moved to the East. For Bernard Leach (1978, p. 187), the West had largely abandoned its ‘laborious hand-methods’. Fortunately, according to Leach, there was in the scene of Japanese ceramics, particularly in the Mingei movement, an opportunity to revive the ‘honest’ spirit of craft.² Led astray by visual art, it was thought that ceramicists aspired to make unique works of art rather than authentic multiples involving repetitive craft processes. By connecting with this Zen spirit, Westerners could liberate themselves from the false path of individualism.³

Leach’s orientalism in Western ceramics echoes the history of primitivism in visual art. Primitivism provided modern art with a scenario for stripping away tradition to reveal life in the raw underneath (Goldwater, 1986). Yet the association of non-Western cultures with a natural existence contained the seeds of its undoing (Foster, 1985). While it may initially be a matter of symbolic opposition to modernity, eventually those whose identities are associated with primitivism become actively involved in the contestation of the Western paradigm. Eventually, real people emerge from behind the African masks. The postcolonial critique argues that the so-called primitive subject of Africa and beyond must now be seen to have an active agency and voice in determining his or her own world (Araeen, 1987). Thus the symbolic challenge of primitivism in modernity eventually becomes a matter of real-world ethics. This paper follows a parallel development in the modern craft movement.⁴

By comparison with visual art, the world craft scene has a history of solidarity between West, East, North and South. In the 20th century, this solidarity is mediated by institutions such as the World Craft Council and UNESCO. During this period, the prevailing ideology was a humanism which positioned craft

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¹ William Morris claimed that ‘Iceland was his “Holy Land.”’ (MacCarthy, 1994, p, 309).
² There are two parts to each of us: the surface man who is concerned with pose and position, who thinks what he has been taught to think; and the real man who responds to nature and seeks life in his work. Bernard Leach (1976, p.17).
³ In Beyond East and West (1978, p.81), Leach responds to a letter from Yanaga that the symbolism of Zen reflects a negative mysticism reflected in denial of ego: ‘Nearly all mysticisms take the negative way to reach a comprehension of the final unity.’
⁴ This focus the political dimension of collaborations in this paper does exclude aesthetic considerations. For instance, I don’t consider the way these collaborations might introduce new techniques or forms into Western textile practice. This is not to deny the place of aesthetic values in the critical assessment of collaborative practice, though they are more difficult to demonstrate in academic discourse. An aesthetic dimension is still necessary to save the work from being seen as purely politics by proxy.
against the mechanical reasoning of the modern West. Octavio Paz (1974, p. 24) contrasted the speed of technology with ‘the heartbeat of human time’ in craftsmanship. Paz’s narrative informed the biennial meeting and exhibition of the World Craft Council in 1974. Since then, there is a natural alignment with world craft and the focus on cultural heritage supported by organisations like UNESCO. Such bodies argue for the need to support cultural traditions that are endangered by modern phenomena such as globalisation.

Reflecting the emergence of fields such as ‘world music’ (Feld, 2000), ‘world craft’ has involved projects that are ostensibly designed to benefit the artisan community. But even though craftspersons around the world are represented through international bodies, it is still rare to hear the voice of the artisan him or herself.

Globalisation

The process of globalisation has accelerated the decline of manual labour in the West. Increasingly manufacturing has outsourced its production to countries such as China (Chossudovsky, 2003). The most prominent areas include clothing and call centres. But in recent times, we are beginning to see this occurring in Western craft practice.

The idea of a craftsperson outsourcing their production would seem anathema to figures like Bernard Leach. For Leach, the process of making was intrinsic to the creative development of the craft form. Today the integrity of the craftsperson may be seen to be threatened not only by visual art, but also design. Within the design paradigm, the craftsperson abstracts his or her production so that it can be manufactured, freeing them from exactly the manual engagement that Leach saw as intrinsic to the spirit of craft.

There is an implied alternative narrative that conceives a developmental framework for craft, whereby a maker eventually ascends to the position of designer. As designer, they can focus on the critical decision-making process about products, rather than its mere execution on the bench. This craftsperson is a ‘designer in waiting’, as in the example of Marc Newson who began as a jeweller before becoming a globally successful designer. On a macro-economic level, this aspirationalism is supported by the notion of a ‘smart nation’ that develops its design capacity while leaving manufacturing to countries where the wages are cheaper.

The globalisation framework has been contested in the 21st century by a number of movements. The Slow Movement, originating in Italy, upheld the value of local produce and skills as against an industrialised consumerism that erased meaningful differences between time and space (Petrini, 2005; Parkins & Craig, 2006). This reaction against consumerism has recently taken a more political expression through emergence of ethical consumerism (Auger et al., 2007). From a more collectivist perspective, the Fair Trade movement has sought to
connect consumers with the lives of producers, particularly in commodities such as chocolate and coffee. This has begun to expand to the production of craft products (Lyon, 2006).

Meanwhile, globalisation has impacted negatively on traditional crafts. In many cases, the local market for such crafts is eroded due to the availability of cheap imported alternatives. This has left many traditional crafts in an unsustainable position. One remedy involves finding alternative markets for these products, where they will be valued for their symbolic importance rather than practical function (Hareven, 2003). These markets are located most often in Western cities.

To enable this connection, it is important to modify the crafted objects to meet the tastes of a predominantly urban audience. This provides a role for an external designer to assist traditional artisans in the development of their product so that it will succeed in this new wealthier market. UNESCO has supported this strategy with the publication in 2007 of Designers Meet Artisans, including case studies where traditional craft have been revived through product development.5

From the designer’s perspective, this also reflects growing philanthropic values in design. High profile design ‘gurus’ like Philippe Starke have made public confessions which admit that their previous work was a negative force in the world, supporting meaningless consumption.6 Programs like the Cooper-Hewitt’s Design for the Other 90% encourage a view that design practice can also provide benefits for the poor countries of the world.

Alongside this have been designers who have developed practices and companies that develop and market craft product from poorer countries. The North South Project, founded by Canadian Patty Johnson, launched at the 2006 New York’s International Contemporary Furniture Fair a range of product sourced from artisans in Botswana and Guyana. Such products are marketed as extending ‘its reach across a global north/south axis’ combining northern design intelligence with southern craft traditions.7

Such developmental design projects follow the Arts and Crafts movement to increased engagement with non-Western communities. However, the designers do not immerse themselves in those traditions in the same way that craftspersons like Bernard Leach worked in Japanese potteries. The relation between designer and artisan is closer to the business relationship between Western company and Chinese factory, though in many cases the ultimate goal is the benefit of the producer rather than the profit of the company.

7 http://www.northsouthproject.com
Outsourcing

Outsourcing craft raises a number of critical questions. Ostensibly such projects are presented as being for the benefit of the producer.\(^8\) While there may be minimal conditions such as specified by Fair Trade that are fulfilled in these projects, it leaves open the broader question of ultimate benefit. Given the demand for such products in the West, what guarantee is there that such enterprises have not been constructed purely for the Western gaze (de Waal, 2002)? Critics of Fair Trade (Scrase, 2003; Lyon, 2006) argue that such gestures only mask the deeper inequities that are largely unaltered by these ameliorative projects. Which of the consumers would swap their comfortable lives for the drudgery of a craft workshop?

There are also questions from the consumer’s perspective. What is the nature of the pleasure that a consumer gains in buying world craft? There is enjoyment related to craft per se, such as tactile stimulation, admiration of craftsmanship, connection with the meaning of the work. But intrinsic to much world craft is a framing narrative that traces such pleasures to the margins of modernity. This can engage with the romantic notions of a community untouched by the degradations of industrial society. Such craft offers an antidote to weakened social ties, disconnection from the physical world and disenchantment. Even further, in purchasing the product, the consumer is invited to feel a sense of solidarity with the producer in their opposition to the crass world of global capitalism.

But these are perceptions of perceptions. What are the critical standards by which we might evaluate the craft-design collaborations that produce world craft? From the artisan’s angle, we might expect that the work is the free and spontaneous adaptation of traditional craft to the opportunities provided by a global market. In this case, the process of engaging with a global market is seen ideally as an exciting creative challenge for the artisans, which helps bridge the gap between past and future. The alternative is for such production to be driven purely by external market forces, similar to the ‘sweatshop’ arrangement in other export industries.

But we need to take into account the reciprocal perspective as well. What does this mean for the development of Western craft practices? How can we incorporate the outsourcing that occurs in the development of product into the creative field of the Western designer-maker? How can philanthropy be incorporated into creative craft practice? To consider these questions, we need to look at examples of contemporary craft collaboration.

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\(^8\) For example, the Indonesian Fair Trade cooperative Threads of Life claims on its website that it ‘encourages weaving communities to revive techniques of weaving and natural dyeing that are in danger of disappearing.’ http://www.threadsoflife.com/revitalizing.asp Accessed 30 October 2009.
The field

The field of world craft is extremely broad. For the purposes of this exercise, we will not focus on the purely philanthropic world of craft. There is a wide range of NGOs that are funded to assist poorer communities by developing their craft practices. This includes creative enterprises like Upasan, the design studio in Auroville, India, which assists poor rural women, including those affected by the 2004 tsunami. Their products such as the Tsunamika are targeted at Western corporations seeking to demonstrate a positive engagement with the world.9

The cases we are examining involve an element of creative partnership between designers and artisans. These can be read critically according to a basic notion of equity10 in which we expect symmetry in opportunity between the two parties. By exploring the structure of their operations, we hope to move towards the development of critical principles for understanding alternative paradigms for world craft. Of particular concern is the relative capacity to determine the nature of the collaboration from the finished work.

Cases

Sara Thorn11

There are a number of Australian craft enterprises that have followed the path of manufacturing in the decision to outsource their production to Asia. The Melbourne-based textile designer Sara Thorn has a history of working with traditional artisans. Her 2003 touring exhibition Dreams of a Golden Thread included work made in collaboration with the Iban weavers of Sarawak, Ari hand embroiderers of Kutch, textile block printers of Kutch and Jacquard weavers of Italy. Thorn’s own personal motif of the mermaid appeared throughout the different craft media in a hybrid manner. The textiles made by the traditional Iban artisans featured Thorn’s motifs, but in a characteristic ikat style.

While an important platform for the development of Thorn’s work, the exhibition did not delve deeply into the perspective of the makers. There was some discussion about the impact of Christianity among the Iban as a factor in opening them up to the possibility of non-traditional designs. This could be read either

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9 On the other hand there are global craft enterprises that have a reverse interest in the market of the poorer countries. Infamously, the British replaced hand-spun cotton products in Indian with milled textiles from north England. In the 20th century, the Dutch textile company Vlisco has been designing cloths for the African market.
10 One measure of such symmetry is Kant’s categorical imperative, “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” (Kant, 1993, p.30)
11 Information about Sara Thorn was sourced from interviews on 17 March 2009 and 16 March 2010.
as a means of exploiting existing cultural dislocation or as a way of stimulating a craft practice that had lost its traditional religious base. But there was little in the exhibition that engaged with the impact of Thorn’s commissioning.

Subsequently, Thorn’s work has focused on a more sustainable retail vehicle for world craft. She conducted research in India towards the best means of developing an ongoing engagement with traditional crafts. With architect Piero Paolo Gesualdi, she developed the WorldWeave enterprise to retail her designs that are manufactured in India using traditional skills. Rather than use village-based artisans, Thorn decided to engage with the newly established craft factories in Delhi and Amristar. In Delhi, she was able to have her cushion designs machine embroidered in the traditional Ari technique from the Kashmir. Her designs were influenced by circus tattoos from Egypt and Indonesia.

Thorn’s commission raises some difficult questions about craft in a contemporary setting. As increasing numbers of villagers migrate to expanding cities in countries like India, it is inevitable that many of the crafts will gradually shift to an urban setting. In terms of the 20th century humanism of Octavio Paz, this represents a distinct loss: craft is no longer embedded in the natural rhythm of rural life. In the factory, craft becomes a mechanised process that can be turned off and on with the whistle.

But there is a more positive perspective. These factories do provide some means by which the craft techniques can be maintained and artisans employed. The factory setting facilitates commissions like Thorn’s which can be conducted on a much more transparent level than when they rely purely on personal trust. Communication occurs mostly in black and white on paper, rather than through conversations that are vulnerable to mistranslation. Factory production can be seen as a way of adapting craft to modern reality, rather than artificially preserving it in museums or tourist villages.

From a traditional craft perspective, the use of machines to embroider designs would be seen negatively as a loss of the handmade engagement with process. Yet, here such craft idealism comes up against the issues of global justice. It can be argued that fewer non-Western people, particularly the young generation, are content with repetitive manual labour. If its appeal to Western markets is that the handmade is good for the soul, then why are not the consumers learning to make their products themselves? If the alternative is for traditional handmade techniques to die out for lack of interest by the young generation, then it may be necessary to accept the use of power tools. Given this, one likely effect of the factory is to remove the artisans further from creative participation in the production process. This need not be inevitable, but the outside designer would need to actively circumvent the hierarchies that normally separate management from labour in a factory setting.

The WorldWeave product allows Thorn to develop her designs at a scale appropriate for retail market, while still maintaining reference to craft processes. However, degree of creative involvement from the producers seems to have
been reduced from that in her touring exhibition. It could be argued that the degree of craft process in the exhibition would be challenged to fulfil the large and time-dependent orders required by retail.

Photograph: James Widdowsen.

polly&me

The paradigm developed under the brand polly&me explicitly attempts to involve artisans in product development. Fashion designer Cath Braid and

12 While in Thorn’s case, objects are being produced for a Western market, there are increasing cases of Australian designer-makers working for companies that service what are today called the emerging economies. These include Karl Millard (India), Jonathan Baskett (Mexico) and Janet deBoos (China). The narrative at play here is of countries that previously were seen as places to have Western-designed products cheaply manufactured. Now, there are growing capacities in design as well as manufacturing. Western designer-makers are being invited in to provide expertise in the development of these industries. This poses a challenging question of whether this will eventually phase out, as this knowledge is finally passed on. Alternatively, it could be that there will still exist a capacity integral in Western culture that will always be needed in manufacturing in the Global South.

13 Information about Polly&Me is sourced from interviews with Cath Braid (January 2, 2009) and Ange Braid (April 14, 2009), catalogue Gup Shup: The domestic, the narrative and cups of chai, website (http://www.pollyandme.com), Summer (2006) and transcripts of interviews with participants conducted after the exhibition.
communications graduate Kirsten Ainsworth developed a business titled Caravana, which worked with women embroiderers living in the north-west frontier region of Pakistan. In 2003, Braid and Ainsworth lived in the Chitral valley, where they attempted to develop a fashion line that incorporated embroidered designs from local women.

The two westerners faced initial resistance from the men in the community, who were strict Sunni Muslims, but they gained local support through an NGO, AKRSP (Aga Khan Rural Support Program). With this local support, they eventually established 10 work centres, each with a female manager and employed approximately 500 women in total. The designs they embroidered combined traditional patterns and the format provided by Caravana. The first collection debuted in 2004 during Sydney Fashion Week and the second was launched in Melbourne in 2006. Caravana as a ‘label with a conscience’ managed to secure major stockists for their product.

However, Caravana disbanded after this initial success. Together with her sister Ange, Cath Braid established polly&me, which attempted to continue this work in an alternative way. During the 2007 Smartworks Symposium at Powerhouse Museum, Cath Braid was impressed with the idea conveyed by a potter working in Ernabella Arts Centre that women artisans had an inherent creativity. She was inspired by this to find ways of including more creative involvement by the women weavers. They then expanded production to include the creation of art works; she developed workshops to help the women develop their own designs. Assisted by a Lebanese aid worker Rolla Khadduri, they conducted workshops over winter in 2008 featuring use of a digital camera and intuitive drawing exercises. Inspiration came from immediate sources like children’s games and consumer packaging. In the end, thirty women were involved in the production of 23 textiles. There was also a series of button pieces with words in Arabic that was produced by a larger group of 250 women.

With support from the British High Commission, these works were exhibited in Islamabad and Karachi. Most sold. The embroideries included stories of everyday life in Chitral, such as the game during Eid when children battle with eggs, and a local figure Sultan the Sitar- Player. In the gallery, the works were exhibited at a distance from the wall so that visitors could read a version of the story on the other side.

A catalogue was produced that highlighted the narratives and a report was written that reflected on the women’s responses to the show’s success. Their responses were positive, including pride at the exhibition’s coverage on satellite television and pleasure at the extra income from sales that would help with their family.14 While this supports the project, it may have been difficult for the

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14 For example, in an interview with one of the artists, she says ‘I felt a certain confidence in me for the first time. Meeting such high level people who were there to see our work was something we had not even thought of in our wildest dream, it was like that I was dreaming. Our prayers are always with Cathy and Rolla, all this would not have been possible without their sincere efforts.’
women to express any problems as this may have seemed inhospitable and ungracious. What seemed important in this case is that the women were asked, which implied that their own views of the project were a part of its success.

While the involvement in art works provides greater participation for the women of Chitral, it is in danger of being seen as a one-off gesture that doesn’t provide any ongoing work. To deal with this problem, polly&me plan to develop a project each year in Pakistan, including an artwork project to raise awareness about HIV among truck drivers. To complement the art work, polly&me continue to produce the bag accessories.

Plate 2: Shehria and Rahmat, The Bet, 2009, cotton embroidery. Based on a story about a girl who broke her arm while trying to win a bet.

Photograph: unknown.

Martina Dempf

One recent area of craft collaboration is in the discipline of anthropology. This is part of a more reciprocal understanding of anthropology in which there is a perceived obligation on the behalf of the visitor to make transparent the nature of their transaction with the community under study (Grimes & Milgram, 2000). The development of a craft product also entails engagement with issues of tradition, authority and aspiration that assist in a better understanding of the community dynamics.

Information about Martina Dempf was sourced from an interview on 27 February 2009.
Martina Dempf is a jeweller based in Berlin who studied with the German modernist jeweller Rheinhold Reiling. During her course, she took off half a year to work as a volunteer in a project by Swiss Aid based in Lesotho (Southern Africa) with a jewellery company called the Royal Crown Jewellers. On becoming a jeweller, she returned to Africa where she travelled through most of the continent. On the basis of that experience, she decided to study anthropology, which resulted in an MA thesis at the Free University of Berlin (‘People Adorned: The Material Culture of the Toposa in Southern Sudan and the Turkana in Northern Kenya’).

During a field trip in 1986, she visited Rwanda, where she saw baskets being made that she thought could be transformed into jewellery. In 2007, she approached GTZ (German Technical Co-operation) and was invited to work with a group of 40 women in Butare who were organized in a crafts association (Rwanda Art). By this time, they seemed disconnected from the basket-making tradition. It was up to Dempf to first recover the lost tradition. Dempf found a thesis on traditional Rwandan crafts from Berlin Museum of Ethnology from which she was able to re-invent traditional designs. Together with the women, they created a collection of grass jewellery. The women created the grass elements from papyrus and sisal. Later, in a separate development, Dempf developed her own version of this jewellery which incorporated the elements made by Rwandan women into a most Western silver casing.

Rwandan basketry is recognized for its strong designs combined with delicate structures (Sullivan, 1978). Traditionally, baskets were made for the royal court. The traditional craft had been challenged by both the decline of the royalty and the arrival of Western goods, accompanied by the omnipresent plastic bags. No longer the only available utensil for containment, the craft of basketry faces the challenge of finding other markets. The recent violent history in Rwanda has not been encouraging for tourists. Given its mobility and universality, jewellery offers the opportunity for Rwandan craftspersons to find an alternative audience.

As a result of these workshops, the Rwandan women have developed a range of jewellery that is now sold online through the cooperative website Rwanda Art: Union of the Art Cooperatives. This jewellery does not have the silver elements, which makes them cheaper but also less durable.

Dempf continues to source components for her jewellery from Rwanda, though she is also engaged in other exchanges with Laos and Cambodia. Her project has further developed the collaboration paradigm. The training necessary for the creation of the components has not only developed a commissioning capacity in the community of Rwandan women to service a German jeweller, it has also given them the opportunity to market their own products directly. Of course, there is still a large discrepancy in the kinds of markets that each are servicing. And there is little information about how successful this enterprise is for the

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16 http://www.rwanda-art.com Accessed 29 October 2009, though it has not been updated since 2006. Rwanda Art has an exhibition and a shop in Butare presenting only locally made products. The local art coordinator also organises the production, so that the women are able to work at home.
women involved. Notwithstanding these limitations, Dempf’s model presents an important paradigm for how craft might be produced collaboratively across the global divide.


Conclusion

The three cases we have examined all involve an element of outsourcing in the craft production process. Within this, they vary in the degree of agency exercised by non-Western artisans. Forms of participation include straight commissioning (Thorn), creative development (polly&me) and business development (Dempf). Given this imbalance, Dempf’s model seems to be the one which offers greatest independence for artisans.

But there are limitations. We measure levels of participation against an ideal situation of equality, in which both designer and artisan have reciprocal powers. Each would be equally capable of initiating projects and defining their meaning. It is clear that none of the three cases we have looked at reach this ideal. In all projects, the ultimate agency lies with the Westerner. The designer is always the one who initiates the project, even if it is on behalf of the artisan. But we need to take this limitation in context. We need to consider the global inequity that forms
the context of these relationships. Individual designers are not able to reverse the lie of the land that constrains reciprocity between Global North and South. Their work can be critiqued against standard contemporary practice rather than the distant horizon of total equality.

In terms of creative development, there are different readings dependent on the aesthetic paradigm. From an individualist perspective, Thorn’s outsourcing seems most consistent with her stylistic development. But from an alternative model of relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002; Murray, 2009), the models established by polly&me provide a more participatory purchase on the creative process.

We can then conclude that craft outsourcing does potentially offer a significant development in modern craft. It continues the role of craft as a bridge between traditional and modern cultures, but with increasing awareness of the political dimension in creative expression. As the focus of primitivism moved from masks to people, contemporary craft-design collaborations reflect a more active role for the non-Western artisans. They are no longer mere performers of difference, but participants in cooperative exhibition and retail ventures.

But there is a long way to go. At this stage we must admit a limitation in possibility of critical analysis. All the information is mediated through the Western partners in this process. We do not have the kind of information that would conclusively negate criticisms that such projects somehow manufacture non-Western participation in order to satisfy a Western need for positive reinforcement of their culture. This is not simply a matter of giving makers a questionnaire to fill out. Given the traditions of hospitality, we cannot take for granted that informants would prioritise formal truth above the need to save face.

To obtain such information is not easy. The wide difference in education between designer and artisan constitutes a difficult barrier. With lack of education comes not only less ability to engage in authoritative Western discourses, such as scholarly articles. But it also lessens confidence in one’s experience against the better-informed views of outside designers.

What is needed now is a mechanism for authenticating the nature of participation in craft outsourcing. This applies particularly where the product is being presented as authentically handmade, such as in the cases discussed here. This would provide a means of countering the scepticism about the staging of difference for the purpose of the Western gaze. The development of a forum for the voice of the artisan is a critical step in the potential of world craft to develop into a vehicle for global dialogue.

The next step is to test the effectiveness of a formal structure that represents the point of view of the artisan. Such a structure should not be constructed solely at the consumer end of the conversation, but involve representative
bodies at the community level of the artisan as well. As world craft production becomes increasingly collaborative, there is increasing need for tools by which such collaboration can be verified.

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From shell work to shell art: Koori women creating knowledge and value on the South Coast of NSW

By Daphne Nash

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Abstract: For many years the shell art of Aboriginal women on the South Coast of New South Wales has been an icon of Aboriginal people’s survival in that region. It is on the record since the 1880s that Koori women have made shell work objects to sell to tourists. This practice is undergoing a revival, and recognition of shell art is increasing particularly through the making of Sydney Harbour Bridges and miniature shoes. As the art work of Indigenous people, shell art is increasingly entering into the art market. When its cultural connections are understood, shell art is no longer dismissed as “tourist art”. What forces are operating and how does shell art mean?

This paper explores the processes of cultural revitalisation and value creation, testing the categorisation of shell art as either Aboriginal or Western, traditional or contemporary, art or craft. In many ways these binaries are not sustainable as contemporary Koori artists connect with their cultural heritage in new ways. It examines the explicit and implicit knowledge contained in the shelled objects, emphasising the complexity of contemporary cross-cultural exchanges and their influences on modes of knowledge production. The value of shell art is transforming through the engagement of Kooris with the art market and other cultural institutions. Moreover, Koori women are finding agency in this continuing cultural practice.

Introduction

Ornamental shell work is found in many parts of the world where ‘delicate and elaborate designs are created using shells in profusion’ (Thomas 2007: 135). On
the South Coast of New South Wales (Plate 1), women from the Koori community have a particular history associated with this activity. As the historical record shows, women made shell baskets at La Perouse to sell in Sydney in the 1880s (Nugent 2005: 49). Since then, Koori women in many places on the South Coast have maintained and developed this practice. Today, shell work or shell art is an active site of knowledge production and value creation.

Plate 1: South Coast of New South Wales. For the purposes of this study, the ‘South Coast’ is the coastal region from Sydney to the Victorian border and inland to the Great Dividing Range.
This paper presents a case study of shell art as a cultural act. Shell art has become a ‘crucial space for negotiation’ (Phillips 1999: 50), however narrow, of a cross-cultural history of people and place on the South Coast. Two important questions guide this discussion: how is shell art valued and how does it mean? My analysis draws out many historical and cultural associations of this particular Indigenous women’s art practice culminating in discussion of a recent shell art installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Sydney. Such new interpretations reveal how shell art can be an expression of deep personal and cultural loss. From its cross-cultural origins and through continued practice, shell artists express their political resistance as well as cultural knowledge through the exhibition and sale of their work.

Museums and art galleries in the region have collected La Perouse women’s shell art over several decades. In the last decade particularly, Indigenous curators such as Allas (2006) and Mundine (2008) have promoted shell artists in exhibitions and written about their work. In 2005, a shell artist, Esme Timbery won the inaugural NSW Parliament Indigenous Art Prize (Parliament of New South Wales 2005) for a decorated model of the Sydney Harbour Bridge (Plate 2) and in 2008, a shell art installation featured at an MCA exhibition. This recent inclusion of shell art into the world of fine art as collectible objects represents a

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significant shift whereby cultural institutions are creating space for objects often categorised as kitsch or tourist art. While recognising the various categories within art, this paper moves beyond an aesthetic or visual critique to explore the process of Indigenous knowledge transmission and the cultural meaning of shell art today. As this case study of shell art demonstrates, the objects may operate as tourist art or commodities at times but the art market is not the main motivation for the makers. Indeed, the Aboriginal women carefully modulate their productivity in order to maintain control of their knowledge and creativity.

**Indigenous and European connections**

Historically, shells were a part of the material culture of south-eastern Aboriginal groups including those on the South Coast of NSW. In 1826, a missionary met people near Bateman’s Bay with whom he traded, receiving gifts from the women including kangaroo teeth fastened to string made from possum fur with gum, shells and red ochre (Harper cited in Organ 1990: 141). A few decades later, the artist Louisa Atkinson (1854) recorded the use of multiple strand necklaces, made from segments of sedge threaded on string, and kangaroo teeth decoration on hair but she does not refer to any shell necklaces. In the late nineteenth century, however, an anthropological observer, Mathews (1896: 342), described the ‘yanniwa’ (women who were guardians of novices in initiation ceremonies) in the Shoalhaven region who ‘wear strings of shells’ among other adornments. Without further evidence, the extent to which the women on the South Coast were continuing a cultural practice of shell necklace-making is uncertain. Nevertheless, the practice continued in the twentieth century.

There may have been connections between other Indigenous and outside practices. Julie Freeman of Wreck Bay has a necklace made by her grandmother Rose Ardler in the 1920s from rice or rye shells threaded onto cotton and it is the ‘same length as Tasmanian necklaces’ (Wells 2003: 19). Any further connection with Tasmanian practices, however, needs further investigation. At La Perouse, ‘women continued to make the occasional shell necklace using pinkies, starries and beachies’ (Wells 2003:19). These necklaces, like some other shelled objects, may have been a response to the fashions of non-Indigenous women of the time.

On the South Coast, the Aboriginal women near Sydney were the first to use shells to decorate baskets for sale. In the 1880s, their shelled ‘baskets were mainly sold to white suburban women’ at stalls on Circular Quay and in other suburbs, beginning ‘the transformation of shell art from Victorian-era curios to a Sydney souvenir’ (Nugent 2005: 81). Local representatives of missionary groups in NSW, such as the Aboriginal Inland Mission worked in the La Perouse

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3 Many of the shells used by Koori women are common small marine invertebrates, such as ‘starries’ (*Scutellastra chapmani*) and ‘beachies’ (*Bankivia fasciata*). Shell identification following Beechey (2009).
Aboriginal community in Sydney and many Aboriginal people became involved in their work. They are credited with teaching the Aboriginal women how to do shell work and other marketable skills. In later years, especially the 1920s and 1930s, tourists came to the Aboriginal art and craft stall at The Loop at La Perouse, the terminus of the tramline from Sydney. Over the years, the women themselves increased the range of shell products as they took control of production and the objects continued to sell. It appears that the women began with baskets and expanded to include other objects as they do today, such as small boxes, picture frames and little shoes (Plate 3).

Photograph: Kelli Ryan.

As for other colonised and Indigenous people, an understanding of tourist art and souvenirs must make reference to the ‘implied texts’ of the products. As Phillips (1999: argues for native Canadian women of the colonial period, their embroidered objects link them to notions of femininity through older associations with women’s crafts, such as embroidery, and through newer ones ‘to the homecrafts of “civilized” Victorian housewives’. Similarly, the occupation of handcraft including shell art was meant to be a step towards assimilation of Australian Aboriginal women while allowing a certain amount of autonomy.
Mission and government authorities at the time had little awareness of ‘women’s economic and social roles in pre-invasion societies’ (Goodall 1995:75) and sought to retrain them in the ways of Europeans to make them suitable workers and mothers. While this is the social and historical context for the beginnings of shell art, other hitherto neglected issues of cultural meaning also need to be explored.

What was the appeal of shell art and why did it sell? Anecdotally it seems that mostly non-Aboriginal women purchased the objects. Were they acknowledging a common aesthetic sense or possibly satisfying a desire for the ‘exotic’? In its early years as tourist art, shell art was popular outside Australia too. In 1910, the Australian Aborigines Advocate reported that an exhibition of Queen Emma Timbery’s renowned work ‘was almost fought for’ in London (Vanni 2000: 410). Indeed, the positive reception by the non-Indigenous consumer of shell art in colonial Australia follows on from the history of shell use in Europe (and America).

In eighteenth century England, ornamental shell work became popular in a variety of forms: in architecture, including house and garden decoration, combining art and botany (e.g. replicas of flowers, etc were displayed under glass), and, as well-to-do ladies’ handcraft. As it does today, the work varied in its quality and aesthetics. By the early twentieth century ‘the market for mass-produced ornaments’ made ‘cheap mementos’ available all over the world and so ‘the tradition of home-crafted decorative shell pieces slowly died away’ (Thomas 2007: 140-141). Against the background of these European trends, the Koori women’s hand-crafted objects had ready appeal for Australian women. It is unclear, however, how much these trends influenced Aboriginal women’s shell work. The aesthetics and meaning of the objects for the Aboriginal women have a different context, as this case study demonstrates.

**Kitsch, miniatures and the souvenir**

Like many Indigenous art objects sold to tourists, shell art can be labeled as kitsch. The appeal of shell art may relate to its kitsch appearance but not primarily to the accepted association of kitsch with poorly made or imitative work that is low down on the hierarchy of aesthetics. On the contrary, as Binkley

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4 Two iconic examples from opposite ends of the eighteenth century point to the popularity of shell work in that era. Alexander Pope, the early eighteenth century English poet and writer had an elaborate shell grotto in his garden in Twickenham that indicated a revival in England at the time (Willson 1998: 31). In the late eighteenth century, Jane and Mary Parminter who trained as architects, designed much of their interior house furnishings at A-la-Ronde in Exmouth, Devon, ‘using mosaic shell work and feather patterns favoured by 18th-century lady amateurs’ (Walker 1986: 14). The National Trust now owns and exhibits the house.

5 Men also bought shell objects: ‘One of their [La Perouse Aboriginal people] biggest markets was American servicemen in Australia during the Second World War’ (Nugent cited at http://www.nma.gov.au/collections/shell_work_sydney_harbour_bridge/ (accessed 21/3/2010). Historically, the sale of shell work in other parts of the world has been linked with sailors who bought gifts for their valentines (Thomas 2007:140).
(2000: 141) argues, kitsch is not a failed attempt at originality ‘but instead it expresses a taste for derivation, imitation and a faithfulness to the tried and true’. In the case of shell art as a souvenir of white women’s visits to La Perouse in the 1920s, the shelled object is a connection to the past and to feelings of nostalgia. Rather than sentimentalising Aboriginal people, the narrative of the experience is sentimentalised. As Stewart (1993: 35) suggests, the souvenir relates more to the moment of purchase for the tourist than to the makers.

Others have argued that the purchase and the act of taking the object into the home is a way in which non-Indigenous people appropriated the exotic souvenir (Moore 2005: 206). The possession of an exotic object offers access to another world, but which aspects of that world are relevant to shell art? It is the complex relationship between kitsch and miniature forms from the artists’ perspectives that is highly significant for understanding shell art today. ‘Most kitsch art objects convey a kind of deliberate and highly constructed innocence’ (Sturken 2007: 21) and the miniature form has associated links to ‘nostalgic views of childhood and history’ (Stewart 1993: 69). Together these attributes present strong visual signs for interpretation of Koori women’s shelled objects, especially the popular little shell shoes (Plate 4). Further analysis here requires some background discussion of the developing local cultural and historical context of shell art practice.


Photograph: Daphne Nash.

6 Detailed analysis of the role of museums and department stores in the appropriation of Indigenous art beyond the scope of this paper.
Cultural and economic survival

Various reasons have been given for the persistence of shell art on the South Coast. From the Aboriginal women’s perspective, cultural aspects are paramount. Some Koori women believe that shell work acted as a conduit for the maintenance of other cultural practices. Art provides a context where women can assume agency through their shell work in determining cultural identity, as surviving members of Indigenous community on the South Coast with their specific relationships to kin and country. ‘In communities where there is no one left to speak a language, ... visual culture is one of the most powerful mechanisms people have to express who they are and why they are here’ (Bernstein 2006: 18), and on the South Coast shell art is part of Koori visual heritage.

At various points in shell art history, economic reasons were significant for the continuation of the art. In the 1980s, Gloria Ardler reminisced about watching ‘her Granny’ do shell work at La Perouse around the 1920s and about her mother and father who ran a little business making boomerangs and shell work and ‘sold them to David Jones and sent work to Melbourne and overseas’ (Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. 1988: 31). An image of boomerangs and shell shoes for sale at The Loop in the 1930s suggests that the shoes already had an important role and apparently shell boomerangs were also introduced around that time (Nugent 2005: 79-81). Functional items, such as milk jug covers edged by crochet work with shells attached to the ends (to weight the covers) were also popular items (before bottled milk in the 1950s). The Timbery family’s stall became a regular feature at the Royal Easter Show selling a range of artifacts including shell work Harbour Bridges, heart-shaped boxes, Good Luck horseshoes on ribbon and serving trays (see Dawn magazine 1963 12(6):9). Proximity to Sydney provided a critical mass of tourists to support a weekly stall at The Loop tram terminus, where boomerangs with burnt or painted designs were the main attraction. Together with shell work, now with an expanded range of covered objects, including Harbour Bridges, these sales ‘became one of the main sources of income for local Aboriginal people and became vital to their survival’ (Nugent 2005: 82-83).

As Aboriginal people came and went from La Perouse in their usual way of visiting relatives for extended periods, they spread their knowledge of shell art down the South Coast. Julie Freeman recalls that her mother brought the knowledge of shell work to Wreck Bay when she moved from La Perouse. According to Indigenous artist, Cheryl Davison, every family on the coast has links to shell work and can name an elderly aunt or grandmother who they remember working with shells. People’s reminiscences suggest that the processes surrounding shell art were enjoyable social activities which included whole family groups as

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7 The Timbery family are local Indigenous people with recorded associations to La Perouse from the beginnings of Sydney.
well as resulting in significant cash for living. Esme Timbery, now over 70 years old, remembers the family trips from the days before she started school in the 1950s and 60s:

‘My mother was a shell work woman. We used to catch the ferry every Monday – catch the first boat over to Kurnell. The men would walk across the sand hills to Cronulla and collect a certain kind of shell. I walked it a couple of times but it was too far – I was just a kid. The women and kids would sit at Kurnell and make some food while the men would collect ‘buttons’ and ‘starries’. The women collected blue shells on the rocks at Kurnell – you had to boil them because they had a fish inside. We called them ‘gubbens’ you’d get them off the rock with a knife. There was also ‘fans’ – all colours, look like a fan. Men would come back and have something to eat and then we’d catch the last ferry home.’

The economic importance of shell art declined significantly by the 1970s. The closing of the tramline to La Perouse in the 1960s would have affected the numbers of visitors there. For a combination of social reasons, including employment and training opportunities elsewhere, as well as access to social welfare, Aboriginal people walked the beaches less frequently and the number of women doing shell work declined.

**How is shell art valued? How does it mean?**

Koori women’s shell art practices have endured within several families on the South Coast. A typical narrative explanation includes its introduction by outsiders and its continuing adaptation of objects for sale (Allas 2006; Vanni 2000; Boardman and Harris 2004; Nugent 2005; Wells 2003). Within this narrative, two common themes emerge: shell art as resistance, and shell art as a form of knowledge transmission.

Framed in the post-colonial discourse of resistance, Esme’s (and other shell work women in her family) use of the Sydney Harbour Bridge and other Australian icons is interpreted by some, e.g. Boardman and Harris (2004) as a political statement. From this perspective the artwork indicates the artist’s rejection of the assumption that Aboriginal people around Sydney have disappeared or died out. Clearly Aboriginal people have survived and Indigenous people are aware of their political and social history as colonised peoples.

From the moment of Captain Cook’s landing, understood by ‘Larpa’ people as the beginning of the invasion and their domination by outsiders, the local Aboriginal people thwarted many attempts to remove them from their land (Nugent 2005). Over the years, the production of artifacts and shell art marked their agency in resisting resettlement, a common theme in the history of black–white relations in the region. Both oral history and the photographic record suggest that boomerangs were the primary focus of tourist trade and Aboriginal

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8 Kooris (and others) often refer to La Perouse as Larpa.
men from La Perouse used boomerang sales for political purposes. Nugent (2005: 84) tells how when selling a boomerang to tourists, the ‘buyer did not only get the object itself but this local Aboriginal story of Botany Bay too’ indicative of 1930s activism. By association, shell art became the complementary women’s artifact production in a resistance role.

From a cross-cultural perspective, the actions of the Aboriginal people at La Perouse who took up shell work at various times since the 1880s can be interpreted as a clear sign of their cultural persistence in that place. Shell work, incorporating a range of activities (meeting, collecting, making and selling) was interspersed within other established social and cultural activities within a changing wider Australian society. Aboriginal people were able to add value to their local knowledge by entering the tourist trade and thereby the cash economy.

Both art commentators and the artists themselves see shell art as a vehicle for inter-generational transmission of knowledge, emphasising both the process of passing down knowledge and the nature of the practical and technical knowledge. ‘This continuous tradition has ensured the survival of cultural integrity, since the making and selling of boomerangs and shell-works involves the handing down from generation to generation of both technical knowledge necessary to the craft and the design, and the knowledge of the bush, the beaches, and seasonal cycles’ (Vanni 2000: 402). Sometimes a stronger ideological framework is evident. Shell artist, Joyce Donavon, wrote on her display at a Sydney conference in 2007: ‘Shell work belongs to Aboriginal people from La Perouse to the far south coast. As saltwater people this craft has been handed down from our mums, grandmothers and aunts’. Her works have been predominantly red, black and yellow, and so by association with colours of the Aboriginal flag (in circulation since the early 1970s), they necessarily convey a political meaning (Plate 5).

Not all Koori shell artists view their work politically and recognise that not everyone learns the art from a close relative of a previous generation. There are other forms of knowledge transfer apart from intergenerational transmission. Through the decline in shell work activity in the second half of the twentieth century, the lines of knowledge transmission were disrupted for shell knowledge, as for all aspects of cultural knowledge.
A revival is underway in certain places on the South Coast where individual Koori women have taken action to reintroduce shell art into their community. Local Indigenous artist, Cheryl Davison organised a shell workshop at the Umbarra Cultural Centre at Wallaga Lake on the Far South Coast during the last weekend in May 2008. More than twelve other Indigenous women from various places on the South Coast came together to share ideas about shelling, through the leadership of South Coast elder Marie Stewart, a prolific shell worker over the last fifteen years (Plate 6). Marie is best known for her miniature shell shoes.


Photograph: Daphne Nash.

**Shell workshop**

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Throughout the workshop, it became clear that the making of art in shell shoes is a cultural act: from the Welcome to Country and the re-enactment of social relationships of the women gathered together, to the collection of shells and other materials, as well as the construction, design, distribution and sales.

Collecting: According to oral history, shell collecting on the South Coast continues in much the same way as it has done for over one hundred years. It was often an activity for the women and children, but large family groups would get involved for many purposes. Even today, people swim, fish, collect bait or wood, or simply spend time in the beach zone, sitting on the sand, sharing memories and reinforcing connections to these places. As Phyllis Stewart remarked:

‘You need a mob with you when you go shelling. You can always find a use for every piece of shell so you’re always thinking how you can use different bits – even for the broken bits.’
The women have names for particular shells and these can vary between groups. Once collected, the women sort and store their shells ready for use (Plate 7).

Plate 7: Wallaga Lake Workshop, Phyllis Stewart’s box of shells, 2008.
Photograph: Daphne Nash.

Shoe construction: Tiny hand-crafted shoes are the most popular item for shelling today and each shell worker has her own shell shoe design. At the workshop, elder Marie Stewart demonstrated her knowledge and techniques. She developed her own style based on accessible and affordable materials including recycled toilet paper rolls and playing cards: ‘You can walk into any Koori house and they’ve got a pack of cards. You can go through up to half a dozen packs in a night!’ Being a game of chance, ‘cards’ is surrounded by invocations of luck and Kooris readily attribute a run of bad luck to a deck of cards. They will not hesitate to change them in an effort to turn their luck. This practice guarantees a supply is available for other purposes (Plate 8).

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9 Further study of the origin and distribution of the names is underway but not included here. In brief, many names have been in use for some time and relate to everyday objects. Some have connections beyond the South Coast.
Although the overwhelming motivation for shell art is the pleasure of meeting and making, the women compete to a certain degree in their exploration of a signature style. Individual pride and sense of achievement are significant as well as a desire to be distinctive in their work in order to stand out and be noticed. The women have their own style for making and shelling shoes and even without taking the shoe apart it is possible to identify the maker. As Indigenous curator, Tess Allas explains, ‘[e]ach artist has their own imprint … you know that’s Phyllis, that’s an Esme, you know that’s a Simms’ (Pakula 2007). Although not explored here, the clue to identification is in the choice of shoe style, shells, shell coverage, the juxta-positioning of shells and their arrangement on the shoe, e.g. Phyllis Stewart favours a layered effect using ‘buttonies’ (Plate 9).  

Colour is an important visual component of the shell shoes. Over the last decade or so, the colours are brighter, due to the increased availability of reasonably priced, mostly imported fabrics and decorative accessories, such as buttons and flowers. Brightness and texture too are integral to the overall effect of each object. Esme Timbery’s signature work of ‘starries’ and glitter ensures a ‘mesmerizing and whimsical effect’ (Allas 2006: 26). This is not accidental or capricious but a mimetic device. The women deliberately use some kind of

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10 ‘Buttonies’ identified as *Ungulinidae* in discussion with John Healy, Curator of Marine Invertebrates, Queensland Museum.
shiny material in all their shell work to attract attention and mark their difference from the older, plainer style as they remember it, and to imitate the brightness and sparkle of the sea and its surrounds.

Photograph: Kelli Ryan.

It is not certain whether the original shell shoes were styled on babies’ booties or miniature adult shoes. Older women today refer to the shoes as ‘slippers’ and ‘booties’ while the younger ones use the term ‘shoes’, a reflection of their preferred designs. The proportions of the early shell shoe shape suggest a doll’s or baby’s bootie and may have been used for ease and simplicity in construction. Most toe-piece decorations are made with mixed-media built on a floral design. The women make flowers with the shells, usually stylised versions or close copies of exotic, garden varieties, such as pansies made from four shell pieces to create the pansy ‘face’, or use a fabric flower. The shoe form (including decoration) has been fairly constant until recently when a range of modern shoe styles has appeared but with similar ‘baby shoe’ dimensions. The miniature flip- flops, thongs, high-heels, platforms and canvas sport shoes are all adult women’s shoe styles, but mostly in ‘baby shoe’ proportions.
Knowledge production

Koori women’s shell objects made for sale have not changed markedly from the beginnings until the present day, which suggests continuing social and cultural motivations. Many older shell art ideas and forms have been passed on, maintaining some specific knowledge such as where to go to collect certain shells. While the missionaries were directing Aboriginal women towards the idea of appropriate work on European gender lines, they failed to understand that occupations such as shell work allowed the meeting of women in ways that strengthened traditions. In this context, ‘collective forms of personhood took precedence over the individual, hence allowing for the persistence of tradition, and the evasion of control in the pursuit of Aboriginal objectives’ (Lydon 2005: 212).

Consistent with this view, Indigenous artist Julie Freeman believes that shell work owes its longevity to the specific cultural practice of gathering. During the time when other activities were suppressed by the mission authorities they apparently ‘didn’t interfere in anyway with the women and children going to the beach. ...They had talks and told stories ... about the character of the ocean ... which wind brings what shells ...Traditional knowledge was imparted from the mums to the kids ... A whole history goes with shell work and that tradition kept all other things alive as well’ (Pallingjang saltwater : Aboriginal artists of the Illawarra & South Coast regions of New South Wales 1997: 8).

Shells and sales

Following the introduction of shell art to the Aboriginal women of Sydney in the 1880s, they had various economic, social and cultural reasons for maintaining the practice. Each shell-covered object took relatively little time to make, especially compared to traditional necklaces such as kangaroo tooth necklace on a fibre string or a necklace from ‘beachies’ (with which they may not have been familiar). Materials for shell art were cheap and available. Shells could be collected readily from nearby beaches and small amounts of cardboard and fabric could be easily sourced from recycling household objects, cardboard being the main packaging material of that era. There was no competing use for the finished object, so it could be kept for sale. The work could be done at home with other women, and the products could be converted to cash, probably the original appeal. Also successful relationships with the missionary workers in the early years would have contributed to the appeal of the work for some people who became active Christians themselves.

The success of shell art resonates with Indigenous people’s art practices in other places. When the women at La Perouse began shelling, tourism was becoming an increasingly worldwide phenomenon where Indigenous societies were engaging in cross-cultural communication through their art. As discussed, the appeal of the miniature is a factor in the sales of the shelled objects. In other
parts of the world ‘during the twentieth century, ... artists increasingly made smaller or simpler versions of traditional objects’ (Bernstein 2006: 17). Although there are no traditional equivalents of shell art in south-eastern Aboriginal culture, the shelled objects fitted into the miniature tourist art category of the times. This appeal continues today.

Value creation

In some ways, the nature and status of shell art is tied to both local and global processes. Morphy (2007) identifies three areas of the value creation process that are significant to the status of Indigenous art generally: the global art market, the Australian Indigenous art context, and Aboriginal community participation. Over the last thirty years or more, various forces within these arenas have promoted much Aboriginal art to the category of Fine Art. Shell art is no exception.

A rise in market price for shell art over the last few years suggests that the value creation process is taking positive effect. The price of shell art is not regulated in any way and depends to some extent on the sales strategies, i.e. person to person or through a commercial outlet. Increasing public exposure and recognition through the art industry, particularly the NSW Parliament Indigenous Art Prize 2005 has increased shell art’s monetary value. Around that time, a pair of shell shoes retailed for about $20.00. In 2006, women were amazed when they sold shoes for $75.00 at an exhibition during the handback of Biamanga/Gulaga National Parks. In June 2009, a pair sold for $140.00 at a gallery in Sydney.

For the artists, sales are not always paramount. The women get satisfaction from collecting their own work as well as selling. Price is largely dependent on point of sale. On most occasions where the works were for sale, the women have commented that they were interested to display their work and get feedback but did not really mind if anything sold. Suzanne Stewart who has been shelling for some time, said in 2008: ‘I keep my things, I don’t sell them – they’re packed away.’ Since then, however, Suzanne has begun to sell some of her work. After winning the art prize in 2005, Esme Timbery’s work has sold well (with increasingly higher prices), but her supply of shell works, especially the larger objects, has not kept pace with demand. Timbery began exhibiting in 1997 and with the help of Indigenous curator, Tess Allas (2007), has exhibited periodically in Sydney a few times, gradually building her reputation. At Birrung Gallery in William St, Sydney in 2007 for example, the gallery manager (pers. comm. 10 July 2007) stated: ‘We can’t keep up with the orders, since the TV Show...’

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11 Prices in $A.
12 A few weeks previously (10 April 2007), ABC TV showed a documentary ‘She Sells Seashells’, featuring Esme Timbery.
of being in the gallery.' To achieve a sustainable enterprise, the women would need to produce much more and sell through galleries. At this time they reject the idea of mass production and prefer the local outlets.

Sustainability is an open-ended question at this time. Even with the bold and positive initiatives of Indigenous curators and others who understand the cultural significance of the work, the future of shell art is not assured. Shell art has a long history of value within the Koori community and over the last few years is enjoying a revival, publicly and in some families. However, the practice may not be particularly robust. Without sustained and expanded effort at both community and institutional levels, it is likely that even fewer women will be making shell art after the older women stop producing. Until very recently, Esme Timbery was considered to be the last woman at La Perouse still shelling.13

Indigenous art curator, Djon Mundine14 admits that it is unfathomable as to why shell artists do not make more work for sale, given that the market is receptive and the Indigenous community values the practice in various ways. The answer may lie in one particular area of the value creation process relating to the way in which Kooris make meaning through their shell objects. The women enjoy the work and the idea that it has a Koori history. While their approach at first may appear casual and opportunistic, the artists show a resolve to be independent, in control and outside the mainstream market economy. Another important consideration is that most Koori women who are shell workers are in receipt of some kind of social welfare payment which may be jeopardised by income from sale of artwork.

Generally, Koori shell art supply and sales are sporadic, in line with production. There is no coordinated centre for production, marketing or sale on the South Coast (although typically objects are available at The Loop at La Perouse on Sundays and at Laddie Timbery’s Art and Craft stall at Lady Denman Museum in Huskisson). Prices are not standardised nor quality set and controlled in any centralised way. From the buyer’s perspective too, sales can be problematic. The purchaser has an expectation of authenticity, i.e. that the maker is Indigenous, and even perhaps that the shells are local. In some cases the shells are not local.15 This is not necessarily an issue for the makers, however, for whom the form of the work and the experience of making a heritage object holds most significance.

The revival of North Alaskan baleen basketry (Lee 1999) presents a useful comparison. In the period 1970s-1980s, workshops were held in many places

13 This comment has been made on many occasions by Aboriginal people from the area, e.g. 10 April 2007, ABC TV documentary ‘She Sells Seashells’. Transcript available at http://www.abc.net.au/tv/messagestick/stories/s2495615.htm.
14 Djon Mundine, OAM is best known as concept curator of the Aboriginal Memorial installation at the National Gallery of Australia. Djon is a Bandjalang man from northern NSW and has some family connections on the South Coast.
15 For example, at times Esme Timbery has bought shells in Sydney and from a mail order service in Queensland (pers. comm. Esme Timbery, 30/5/2006) and so their origins are not always known.
to revive Indigenous basket making practices. Following a period of dormancy after decades of prolific production and trade, communities began to revive the knowledge. Around the same period, collecting institutions in the US began buying the baskets. Their exhibition of these objects in turn educated the public and revived their interest. A similar process appears to be occurring with shell art, if a little earlier in the cycle.

MCA exhibition: shell shoes and loss

The shell art installation, ‘Shell Slippers’ at the ‘New Acquisitions’ exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in December 2008, brought a new perspective to South Coast shell art, suggesting that the meaning of shell shoes may be more complex than so far imagined by outsiders. Indigenous curator, Djon Mundine commissioned the work for a previous exhibition of Indigenous art ‘Ngadhu, Ngulili, Ngeaninyagu: A Personal History of Aboriginal Art in the Premier State’ (Mundine 2008). His original idea, in collaboration with the two artists, Esme Timbery and her daughter Marilyn Russell, was to display two hundred shell shoes. Only one hundred and twenty shoes were available for the exhibition. Djon’s motivation in curating the shell shoes was ‘to lift the reading to another level – not just kitsch’ (pers comm. 11 March 2009). In keeping with his view of the role of a curator, one should never allow the artists work to go unexplained or to ‘look bad’. The label of kitsch has connotations of poor quality and insignificance. Such attributes are not consistent with the knowledge of the role of shell art in the Indigenous South Coast community or with an open attitude to all Indigenous art expression. Djon was keen ‘to draw out the best’ in the work which may have previously been unrecognised.

Djon Mundine believes that ‘[m]uch art comes from a longing concerning the past’ (Mundine 2008: 33) and he applies this thesis to shell art shoes. For many NSW Indigenous people, there is a pain associated with the ‘loss’ of children from the Stolen Generation.16 The artist Esme Timbery had a sister who was taken away. In her discussion with Mundine, it is clear that she experiences ongoing pain and loss associated with that trauma.

Djon Mundine takes the idea of loss further in that some people with deep, psychological pain choose to perform simple, routine tasks over and over again as a way of subconsciously coping with their pain. He believes that shell art may have served this purpose for the Aboriginal women of La Perouse. In particular, shell shoes with their obvious similarity in form to baby shoes focus on the loss of children and babies, a loss that many Aboriginal families can relate to. The association of the miniature form with loss and longing is also

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16 ‘The Stolen Generations’ is the term used to refer to the generations of Aboriginal children who were taken from their families as a result of Australian Government policies mainly during the period 1909-1969.
well founded (Stewart 1993). Moreover, both the adult and baby shoe forms are highly personalised female objects and their appeal to other (white) women draws on that connection.

The shell shoes installation plays on the viewer’s perceptions of repeated images. The use of ‘visual redundancy’ provides ‘visual and textual authority’ (Steiner 1999: 92, 95). In ‘Shell Slippers’ at the MCA, the mass display establishes the shell shoe as part of the canon of Indigenous art. In the beginning, Mundine commissioned two hundred little shoes: ‘Every number has its own aesthetic and context, every figure it’s own story...’ (Mundine 2008: 21) and the context is the number of years of European presence in Australia. In the final installation, he achieved a critical mass of shoes and although less than two-hundred, the visual effect is strong. The viewer looks for more meaning in the configuration: the rectangular shape is flag-like but not a flag. That shoes of the same colour are grouped together keeps the viewer peering at, and through, the space, searching for a recognisable form.

Empty shoes have a resonance with other historical moments, such as in the images of shoes belonging to children who perished in the Holocaust (Feldman 2008: 124), another event deeply associated with suffering and loss. Also for modern Kooris, empty shoes denote the widespread Western, including Australian, practice in families of keeping a child’s first shoe as a memento of a passing developmental phase. In the ‘Shell Slippers’ installation, the mass of empty shoes is both the medium and the message.

Mundine’s interpretation may explain why the Aboriginal women of ‘Larpa’ and the South Coast have maintained the shell art practice for so long (over 120 years), although in a fairly limited way. The artists have not moved to a more intense level of production because they reject the commodification of such deeply personal associations of home and family based activities. Instead, the production and sale of shell art over more than a century is grounded in the private/domestic sphere extending beyond to an engagement with non-Indigenous people through limited exposure in exhibitions, media and sales associated with the art industry. In many ways, the artists limit their participation in the public domain by choice in order to remain in control of the processes. At the same time, they are committed to communicating through their art to a wider Australian audience about their cultural knowledge. Their strategies may not have always been understood but the impact of their actions is unambiguous. For too long, shell art has been underestimated as a visual mode of cross-cultural communication about Indigenous history and knowledge on the South Coast.

Conclusion

Shell art will always be known as the activity of the Aboriginal women of La Perouse and other parts of the South Coast of NSW, but its future is unclear.
Undoubtedly, the global art process and the Australian Indigenous art market, including tourism, will have a significant impact on how successful shell art can become. It is the Koori community, however, who will decide the extent to which this can happen. Currently the women’s agency in reviving the tradition is significant. They demonstrate a breadth of culturally specific knowledge communicated in a particular visual style that maintains a resistance component. As this case study demonstrates, the revival of shell art is closely associated with opportunities for cross-cultural engagement and the processes of value creation.

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