



STRING THEORY

FOCUS ON CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN ART

A PAINTING CAN BE A WEAVING. A PHOTO CAN BE A BASKET

String theory is a scientific framework that posits a theory of everything. In the context of this exhibition, it implies expansion and connection across time and space, a porous and open-ended embracing of diverse approaches to the idea of 'fibre' or craft-based disciplines. In this way, *string theory: Focus on contemporary Australian art* brings together over 30 Aboriginal artists and artist groups from across Australia who work with expanded notions of textile and craft-based traditions.

Many of the works on display use handmade string produced from plant fibres as an integral component. This string is the *lingua franca* of the exhibition. It is both a physical material and a conceptual link that expands into a notion of connectivity. Aboriginal interior designer Alison Page has noted that string was an integral binding material within Indigenous architecture.¹ It holds things together, and as a metaphor can extend to holding people and ideas together. It can be tangled and it can be tidy, strong and delicate, complex and simple.

The show unravels across geography and media. Central to this is the idea of transformation: media being slippery and unfixed. A painting can be a weaving. A photo can be a basket. A text is a container, or a bag is a receptacle of ideas and a way of carrying things. But while many of the artists use photography, painting and installation, their work is still grounded in a textile tradition.

The other key component of *string theory* – perhaps the key one – is people: people talking and people making. All of the artists in the exhibition are by their very nature collaborative. Such is the practice of Brisbane-based Dale Harding, where first an idea and then an object grows out of conversations with his grandmother and mother, slowly evolving into works that tell the hard truths of Australian history. A similar evolution can be traced in the tactile environments of the Tjanpi Desert Weavers, a culmination of discussion, travel across vast distances of Central Australia, and hands-on work between artists and art workers in communities, cities and towns, Indigenous and non-Indigenous working together.

In *string theory*, art is not *about* politics or *about* community: it is, instead, political and communal. It is not *about* social capital as an abstract concept but, instead, it engages with real social change and affect. Until recently, many of the artists may not have even considered themselves artists but, rather, as participants in a larger dialogue between themselves, families, peers and tradition. The exhibition privileges the exchange of knowledge through social, familial and community structures as much as the creation of objects.

One of the pivotal moments in the genesis of the Museum of Contemporary Art was the purchase for the Power Collection of the entire contents of *Objects and Representations from Ramingining*, the exhibition curated by Djon Mundine for the Power Gallery in 1984. This collection included numerous examples of works using weaving and textiles. It was the first major purchase of Australian art by the curators of the Power Collection, a deeply symbolic act that continues to resonate into the present. This led to a later purchase by the MCA Collection of a significant group of woven works from Maningrida assembled by Diane Moon.² Both purchases signalled a significant shift from woven objects being perceived as works of material culture to becoming objects of contemporary art.

string theory is a further progression in the MCA's ongoing dialogue with this important area of artistic practice. A number of works in the exhibition, such as those from Ramingining and Yirrkala which have now been made a part of the MCA Collection, have a direct lineage back to the earlier collections. In one instance, a yam string vine by Ramingining artist Frances Djulibing is a reprise of an earlier piece.

I would like to suggest that Aboriginal textile-based art sits at the MCA's core like a time bomb. It is a clear indication of Aboriginal art's radical ability to rupture contemporary art's trajectory. Indigenous art is innovative, suggesting a certain kind of 'newness', while also being grounded in tradition. It blurs the clear distinction between the trained and untrained. It is both

folk art and contemporary art of the highest order. To use a maligned and perhaps misunderstood phrase, it is on the one hand 'outsider' – both in a formal, artistic and political sense – yet very much a vital insider.

In much the same way that Aboriginal painting ushered in the re-emergence of this medium as a vital Australian contemporary force in the 1970s, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander textile-based art smashes the notion that craft lacks validity within the contemporary gallery context. The MCA has been a major part of this reconsideration and it is a history we proudly proclaim. *string theory* also acknowledges that it is a history with people, and not objects, at its centre and that it is an engagement that continues.

Glenn Barkley

1 / In conversation with the author, March 2013.

2 / The Power Collection was established in 1968 as part of the endowment of John Joseph Wardell Power to the University of Sydney. Bernice Murphy, the MCA's founding curator, notes that it was not until 1984 that Australian art was considered for purchase for the Power Collection. There were no further purchases for the Power Collection after 1988. The MCA Collection commenced in 1989 with the MCA's constitution. Significantly, the first two accessions were two large bark paintings by Maningrida artist John Mawurndjul. For more information see Bernice Murphy, *Museum of Contemporary Art: Vision and Context*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1993.

TOP TO BOTTOM / MCA Aboriginal Art: *The Maningrida Collection*, installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, 1994 / *The Native Born: Objects and Representations from Ramingining*, Arnhem Land, MCA Collection of Aboriginal Art, installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, 1996 / Mary Gubriawuy *Yukuwa (Feather string yam vine)* c.1984, installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, 2010, 2 works: beeswax and feathers on bark fibre string, J W Power Collection, University of Sydney, managed by Museum of Contemporary Art, purchased 1984, licensed by Viscopy, 2013, © Mary Gubriawuy



RIGHT / Evelyn McGreen, *Wawu Djimburr Waddthurr & Mulun/horned basket for collecting cone shells and quondong fruit (detail)* 2009, hand-coloured linocut print, image courtesy the artist, Hope Vale Arts & Cultural Centre and FireWorks Gallery

THE PRINTED BASKET

EVELYN MCGREEN AND JEAN BAPTISTE APUATIMI

Contemporary Australian print-making is by its very nature collaborative, and over the last three decades innovations have been driven from within the field by Indigenous artists working closely with master printmakers in Melbourne, Sydney, Darwin and, more recently, Cairns. This has led to an increase in production, from the size and number of editions through to scale and technical complexity.

Although important, such scale and complexity need not be necessarily indicative of what makes a great print. Perhaps the key element of interesting print-making, regardless of social or cultural background, is in fact exchange: exchange between individuals, from technical to spiritual, before these ideas are fed into the presses.

Indeed, that Indigenous art remains an art of social interaction is evidenced by the recent print-making projects of the late Tiwi artist Jean Baptiste Aputimi and Evelyn McGreen, a Guguu Yimithirr woman of the Thupi Warra clan in Far North Queensland.

Working in collaboration with master printmakers Jacqueline Gribbin, Karlissa Kennedy and Glynis Lee at Northern Editions in Darwin, Aputimi created prints that transform a basket into a flat etching and then back again into a three-dimensional upright print. The prints are based on the traditional form of the tunga, a bark basket that has both functional and ceremonial use. Traditionally tunga have a material heft roughly made from thick folded bark and manipulated then covered in patterning that ranges from robust to delicate. The baskets are made by folding a length of bark and then stitching along the edges, as Jennifer Isaacs has written:

In the Tiwi creation story ... it was Pwanga (spider-woman) who made the first tungas. Taking a sheet of stringybark by stripping it from the tree and heating it until it flattened out, the legendary spider-woman stripped off the charcoal surface of the outer layer, then folded the long strip over. Making holes in

the edges, she sewed up the bark with a length of jungle vine to make a container ... Pwanga, the ancestral female, gave this first tunga to her husband who painted it for Purakapali, for his son's burial. As a spider, Pwanga is often found today in a bark crevice making string from her own body ...¹

Tunga are most often seen in Pukamani, or funeral ceremonies, of the Tiwi. The baskets are filled with gifts for the dancers and are then placed over the top of grave posts, known as Pukamani poles. Aputimi's printed tungas are complex renditions of the bags, made first in a two-dimensional printed form then pushed into the three-dimensional, testing the skills of the artist and printmakers in calibrating and registering the images in a complex curved form from a flat sheet. The prints, once made, are then sewn together in a traditional way similar to bark tungas, with vine prepared and sewn by the artist's daughter Maria Josette Orsto. The paper baskets are etched using a sugar lift etching technique that in some ways reflects a painterly process. The patterns represent traditional designs, some of which are based on the Jikipayinga, or female crocodile, that has a particularly personal resonance:

Long ago my husband was hunting and fishing when a big crocodile jumped out of the water and grabbed his arm. He save himself. He grab that inside part and pulled. That crocodile let go and died. He didn't want to eat that crocodile. He been chuck him away. I had two girls at that time, Carmelina and Josette. My husband was a brave man.²

Based in Hope Vale, Evelyn McGreen has lived a life as maker, weaver and teacher.

In her 2009–10 print series *Wawu Bajin/Spirit Baskets*, there is a transformative correlation between subject and media. In these works McGreen depicts baskets containing traditional foods and plants, each basket depicted having been woven with a specific plant or distinctive weave particular to each bag's contents. The work comes out of a lifetime of living and



working in her country and which has engendered a palpable sense of place:

My father was a pioneer of this place, and helped build the church here. In my early years I loved helping my dad with his carpentry. I was a bit of a tomboy. I loved working with tools. I spent my school years here and married Benny McGreen in 1962. We had five children.

I started painting in about 2002. My early paintings were of sea animals, fish and flowers. When I started, I was a bit lost, but now I know what I'm doing and what I want to achieve. I'm using different shapes and backgrounds.

I am also a basket-weaver, I weave with sisal hemp, pandanus, Beach Hibiscus and bajin (Lomandra longifolia) and use bush dyes to colour the fibre.³

McGreen's works are simple and direct with drawing and design that are sure and assured. Linocut is perhaps the simplest of print mediums and McGreen's works are beautifully executed in collaboration with master printmakers Theo Tremblay and Paloma Ramos at Canopy Artspace in Cairns. They transcend their otherwise black-and-white palette through the application of hand-colouring which makes them glimmer and sparkle – somehow like dream baskets all a-shimmer in the night sky.

Theo Tremblay has described McGreen as an important person in her community for her ability to bring people together as well as her artwork:

The key to Evelyn's involvement was with the group and her people, her stories and coaxing others to be part of the arts centre in Hope Vale. She loved working in a team as an ambassador, a participant, a mother to many younger artists.⁴

In *string theory*, print-making presents weaving, and in particular basket-making traditions, in symbolic and metaphorical ways. The works of Aputimi and McGreen are emblematic in the way they transform ideas and media: in the case of Aputimi, shifting something three-dimensional into a flat surface, printing, then expanding it out to become a real basket, albeit in a purely non-practical sense, to McGreen's images of dreamlike containers of hope and symbolism. Both artists are also key leaders, members and teachers in their communities and their messages of goodwill and knowledge will continue to resonate into the future.

Glenn Barkley

1 / Jennifer Isaacs, *Tiwi: Art/History/Culture*, The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne University Publishing, Melbourne, 2012, pp.192.

2 / Editioning notes, Northern Editions, Darwin, 2012.

3 / 'Evelyn McGreen', media release, www.fireworksgallery.com.au/WawuBajin2010/EvelynMcGreenBio.htm, accessed 19 June 2013.

4 / Email to the author, 20 June 2013.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT / Evelyn McGreen, *Wawu Bajin Dhangay Bulganghi/strainer for washing clams and shellfish* 2009 / *Wawu Bajin Mayi/basket for collecting bush tucker* 2009 / *Wawu Bajin Whukay/basket for cherry and yam* 2009 / *Wawu Bajin Nirrpun/basket for collecting berries* 2009 / *Wawu Bajin Tharrar & Girbuti Mayi/basket for collecting cats eye snails, shells and seaweed* 2009 / *Wawu Djimburr Birra Whukay/horned basket for eucalypt medicine leaves* 2009

hand-coloured linocut print, images courtesy the artist, Hope Vale Arts & Cultural Centre and FireWorks Gallery



EVELYN MCGREEN

Born c. 1942, Woorabinda, Queensland. Lives and works Hope Vale, Queensland. Thupi Warra clan, Guugu Yimithirr language

An accomplished basket weaver, working with materials ranging from sisal hemp, pandanus and bajin, and using bush dyes to colour the fibre, Evelyn McGreen was raised in Hope Vale, an Aboriginal township on Cape York Peninsula in Far North Queensland. During World War II, the military relocated the Hope Vale settlement's entire population, including the artist's parents Roy and May Dick, to her birthplace of Woorabinda, an Aboriginal Reserve 170 km south-west of Rockhampton. Her family returned to Hope Vale in the early 1950s; McGreen's carpenter father was influential in the re-establishment of the settlement, constructing a number of local buildings including the church. In 1962 the artist married Benny McGreen and they had five children.

While teaching traditional arts and crafts throughout her life, it was since the early 2000s that McGreen began developing a strong and expansive body of work in other mediums, gaining international recognition for her prints based on traditional basket designs. Her works on paper are held in numerous public collections including Artbank, Sydney; Parliament House, Canberra; and the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane.

THE EYE HAS TO TRAVEL

The *string theory store* is a response to the disconnect that may occur to visitors when looking at fibre and textile art within a gallery context. For this exhibition, the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia has taken the unusual step of commissioning designer Alison Page to create a shop that is physically situated within the gallery space, an openly commercial hub that seeks to initiate a conversation about art.

An award-winning designer in her own right, Page is also the Creative Director of the National Aboriginal Design Agency, an organisation that collaborates with Aboriginal artists to create unique design products such as carpets, textiles, lighting and architectural objects that 'tell a story'.

Page's design for the *string theory store* merges fine art and sustainable design functionality. Cardboard boxes are woven together to create an arcing wall of display shelving. Plinths for objects are made of coiled packing cardboard. Hanging from the ceiling, a hoop threaded with handmade string by Yirrkala artists suspends merchandise. Enclosing the entire space is a specially designed lace curtain that depicts Gumbaynggirr artist Brentyn Lugnan's *seed dreaming* (2013).

Traditional weaving and craft objects have their own individual autonomy. They can sustain the sometimes harsh gaze of the museum, asserting their place on the pedestal, plinth and vitrine. They are beautiful, inspiring things. But a disconnect can happen when visitors first admire an artist's work in the gallery and then see the same object often by the same artist for sale in the store – their sensibilities are split between the two spaces, between beholding a rarefied museum object and something ready to be consumed and taken home. What's the difference between this item in the shop and the item in the gallery?

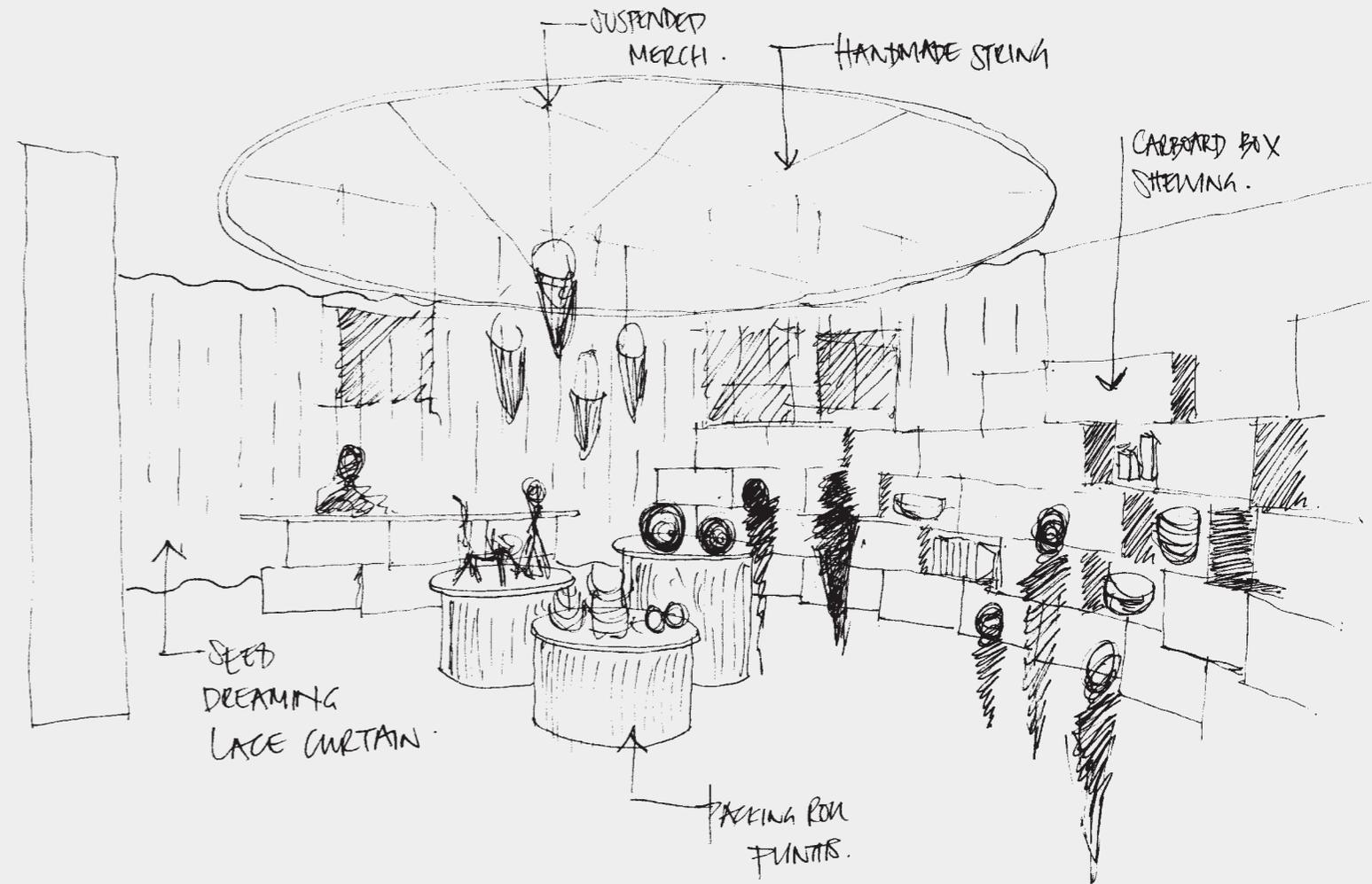
Perhaps it's naive to think that *string theory store* makes this conundrum any clearer. In fact it muddies the waters further – what is a store doing inside the art gallery? Are these art objects? Can I take one home please?

The *string theory store* openly acknowledges the social importance that the market plays in Aboriginal art and life. The work – is it an artwork, a shop or both? – is inspired by the art centres and organisations that assist in building economies for Aboriginal artists that have a long lasting and financial benefit to them and their communities.

It is also a response to the sheer beauty of abundance that you see in a place such as the Tjanpi Desert Weavers head office in Alice Springs. Here the exuberance of objects is an overwhelming visual experience – and a reminder that, to quote the fashion editor and curator Diana Vreeland, 'the eye has to travel'.¹

Glenn Barkley

¹ / The title of the 2011 documentary by Lisa Immordino Vreeland and Bent-Jorgen Perlmutt.



THE NOONGAR ARTISTS OF NARROGIN AND PINGELLY

The first time I saw dolls from the Noongar artists of the Southern Wheatbelt of Western Australia was at the Sydney home of collector Peter Fay. As I recall, Peter had been sent a group of the dolls in a shoe box and I happened to be there the day the dolls arrived. There was a real sense of excitement as each doll was unwrapped. Those dolls are now in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra.

I loved the dolls from the moment I saw them. I responded to the raw vital energy that seemed to have gone into their making and the pure power of love and spirit that seemed to pour out of them. Each represented a different person and each was individual. In this first group I saw, I remember that pinned to the clothes on each doll the artist had written a name. It seemed as though each doll maker had created a portrait of themselves. Each doll seemed to have captured the essence of their namesake and I wanted to hold them in my hands and protect them.

Since then I have always hoped I would be able to work with the artists and their amazing dolls and I'm really pleased – and honoured – to be working with the Noongar artists of Narrogin and Pingelly for *string theory* at the MCA. The artists are still making their work and new artists have become part of the doll making family. CAN WA has been bringing textile artists Nalda Searles and Cecile Williams to Narrogin and the surrounding Wheatbelt to introduce doll making to a new generation of Noongar artists. All are busy making and their stories continue to be told.

Sometimes I think the art world wants to ignore things like love and spirit but with the Noongar Doll Makers it's undeniable, and infectious. We are all the better for them and their work being in the world.

Glenn Barkley



ABOVE / Lizzie Riley, *Charlotte* 2004

RIGHT / Jean Riley, *Doreen* 2004

recycled clothing, knitting, cotton, University of Wollongong Art Collection, images courtesy the Noongar Doll Makers and University of Wollongong Art Collection, photographs: Bernie Fisher

NEXT PAGE / Noongar Doll Makers Workshops 2012, images courtesy the Noongar Doll Makers and CAN WA, photographs: Bo Wong



HOURS OF DOING

RAMINGINING ARTISTS FRANCES DJULIBING AND ROBYN DJUNGINY AND THE MCA COLLECTION

One of the pivotal moments in the genesis of the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia was the purchase by the Power Collection of the exhibition *Objects and Representations from Ramingining*. This collection of objects, curated by Djon Mundine for the Power Gallery in 1984,¹ included numerous examples of works utilising weaving and textiles – what may have been defined then, and still, as material culture.

As outlined by Bernice Murphy, the curator at the Power Gallery at the time of the exhibition:

*[T]he exhibition ... was presented to the public under a title that sought to hint at its unusual double-consciousness: of both objects and an informing network of interconnecting cultural meanings influencing their interpretation. These interacting conditions were understood as mediating both the production and reception of forms, within the originating context of a communal play of meanings.*²

The Yukuwa encapsulates the ideas outlined here by Murphy. It exists as both a beautiful handmade object and as a component of a broader conceptual, familial and social network. Made from fibre sourced from djan'pa or the banyan tree that grows prodigiously in Northern Australia around Ramingining, and which is stripped, soaked and then rolled on the maker's thigh into one continuous piece, this feathered string represents a yam vine that is an important totem of the Yirritja moiety. It suggests a family tree, of kinship lines reminiscent of the way family groups are tied together, mapping the relationships of clan and kin. The Yukuwa also symbolises renewal of people and land; it is expressed in body painting designs, song lines, dance, weaving and various ceremonies. Yukuwa is often used at large gatherings of different clans, brought into ceremony by dancers and displayed as a form of identification. Once the ceremony is complete, the Yukuwa is given to a custodian to keep safe and is only shown again at the next ceremony.³

As Djon Mundine explained to MCA Curator Anna Davis in 2010 in relation to a Yukuwa made by Mary Gubriawuy in the MCA Power Collection: *The yam is sacred and is referred to as a baby or special being. The vine is like an umbilical cord, connecting the baby to the mother. Hence the spirit of a person is always connected to the spirit world.*⁴

Significantly, *string theory* sees the accession of a newly commissioned Yukuwa into the MCA Collection – this one made by Ramingining artist Frances Djulibing as a reprise of the earlier piece by Gubriawuy. The inclusion of the new Yukuwa, together with work from fellow Ramingining artist Robyn Djunginy, represent an important new chapter in the evolving story of the MCA and Ramingining. The strong presence of both these artists in *string theory* signal an expansion of an already profound and longstanding dialogue.

Djunginy is an artist whose work also has a history within the MCA Collection. A work of hers, a mininggalil (fish trap) was part of the original group of works from Ramingining acquired for the Power Collection. Djunginy works almost exclusively with the image of a bottle in both painted and woven forms and they have occurred in the artist's repertoire since mid-1983. Living at the outstation of Mulgurrum at the time, Djunginy was encouraged to make woven bottle shapes by Djon Mundine. This inspiration came from Italian Chianti bottles that are sometimes contained within a woven cradle, and soon Djunginy was producing both woven and painted bottle forms. As the artist has said: 'My bottles represent happy times ... for black people and white people the same.'

The use of a bottle form has obvious references to alcohol and its use, misuse and abuse in all communities (not just Indigenous). It can indeed be for good times, but the flip side can be the bad times and the damage wrought by its introduction and normalisation within broader Australian culture. These works speak of these dichotomies while staying as beautiful and arresting artworks that sag and undulate under their own materiality.



Djunginy is the only artist from this area to be producing and painting bottles. She is currently in the process of passing the bottle story on to her daughters so that they can continue the tradition. The forms may also refer to a site of the honey ancestors near the airstrip in Ramingining. The painted bottles also resemble Nambi, a limestone spearhead pattern that is only painted by very senior custodians as part of the Wagilag story.⁵ There is a transformative play at work between the woven bottles as objects and their depiction in paintings that is a tendency spread across a number of works in *string theory*.

The works by contemporary Ramingining artists Frances Djulibing and Robyn Djunginy are central works in the exhibition that look back to the MCA's history while also signifying a continuation of a vital and important practice.

Indeed, to sit with the artists of Ramingining and witness them strip back the pandanus to a state where it can be used for weaving, wrapping and binding, is a humbling lesson. What looks easy – the splitting, then splitting again, along the grain of the fibre – is a form of manual dexterity that only comes through hours of doing, but this sitting and talking is an important part of the artistic process. This can be extrapolated out to the dialogue that is taking place within the Museum, which on one level is a community of individuals, gaining further understanding from another community about the legacy, power and importance of objects.

Glenn Barkley

The author wishes to acknowledge and thank Frances Djulibing and Ben Wallace at Bula'bula Arts Aboriginal Corporation, Ramingining, for their assistance with this text.

1 / Djon Mundine worked in various art advisory roles in central Arnhem Land for 16 years from the late 1970s, working primarily at Ramingining but also at Milingimbi and Maningrida. He was the curator in 1984 of *Objects and Representations from Ramingining*. This exhibition and the curatorial framework initially developed by Bernice Murphy and Leon Paroissien, then brought to fruition by Mundine, is an example of innovative curating that is still ahead of its time. The entire contents of this exhibition were purchased by the then Power Collection from 1984 and is one of the foundational moments in the MCA's history.

Mundine's influence on the path of Indigenous art over the past 40 years cannot be overstated. His essay 'The native born' details his time at Ramingining. 'At the beginning of 1979,' he writes. 'I had arrived at Milingimbi, to work as an Art and Craft Adviser, just after the setting up of Ramingining Arts. It is indicative of the evaluative perspectives on Aboriginal art at the time that this was invariably abbreviated to Craft Adviser in everyday communication. In the early 1980s I started to use the title Art Adviser – a more culturally acceptable *fine art* term, more accurately describing my position in relation to the work I was handling.' Although a simple distinction, it is a provocative and revolutionary one, and Mundine's influence runs strongly through *string theory*.

For more information about the exhibition and acquisition see Bernice Murphy (ed.), *The Native Born: Objects and Representations from Ramingining, Arnhem Land*, MCA, Sydney, 2001; and *Museum of Contemporary Art: Vision & Context*, MCA, Sydney, 1993.

2 / Murphy, op.cit., p.23

3 / Ben Wallace, Curator, Bula'bula Arts Aboriginal Corporation, Ramingining, email correspondence with the author, 13 June 2013.

4 / As quoted in Anna Davis, *MCA Collection: New Acquisitions in Context 2010*, MCA, Sydney, 2010, p.8.

5 / As speculated by Ben Wallace, Curator, Bula'bula Arts Aboriginal Corporation, Ramingining, op.cit.

PREVIOUS PAGE / Frances Djulibing, *Yukuwa (Feather string yam vine)* (detail) 2013, banyan tree bark, cockatoo feathers, beeswax, Museum of Contemporary Art, purchased 2013

RIGHT / Robyn Djunginy, *Bottles* (detail) 2009, acrylic on canvas, Private Collection

NEXT PAGE / Robyn Djunginy, *Bottles* 2013, pandanus, natural dyes, image courtesy Bula'bula Arts Aboriginal Corporation, Ramingining

