

The Significance of Fibre Art: People, Place and Environment

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Masters of Visual Arts by Research

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the work herein, now submitted as a thesis for the degree of Master by Research is the result of my own investigations, and all references to ideas and work of other researchers have been specifically acknowledged. I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis has not already been accepted in substance for any degree, and is not being currently submitted in candidature for any other degree.

Alyson Megan de Groot

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Acknowledgements

Primarily, I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of this country as the custodians and keepers of the land for their acceptance and sharing of knowledge, which has culminated in this research.

My Supervisor Sylvia Kleinert offered tireless support and endless knowledge, giving me the enthusiasm and inspiration to manifest this story of women weaving together with the land and each other to tell their own stories, celebrating and forging relationships with Country and each other.

Professor Bart Currie has informed and inspired my work through sharing his knowledge and passion for the humble box jellyfish. The staff at the Museum and Art Gallery of the NT (MAGNT) natural sciences section gave me access to archives which informed my studio and theoretical research.

Tobias Richardson, my studio practice supervisor, was a source of endless and committed support, reminding me of the power found in keeping it simple. Simon Cooper, my second studio practice supervisor, gave me a new perspective and invaluable insight which saw me through in the final and crucial stages of my studio practice.

Finally, thanks to Zion for his patience and support. Everything I do is for you, my amazing friend.



Abstract

My Master of Arts thesis, *The Significance of Fibre Art - People, Place and Environment*, is the culmination of two years of studio practice and theoretical research. The studio practice has culminated in *Signs*, an exhibition at Charles Darwin University in February 2009. This exegesis provides a contemporary context and explanation for my artwork through an exploration of the key issues which inform my art making.

The major focus for my practical and theoretical research is the use of plant materials as a medium to make art. The exegesis explores the significance of fibre art to Indigenous people in relation to maintaining their cultural integrity in response to colonial influences. An extensive experimentation with the use of plant materials and basket making techniques over the past 15 years has been further expanded upon in my Masters studio research. Through the exploration of installation practice I create visual narratives to 'weave stories' that draw upon my personal experiences from working with and learning from Indigenous people.

Another major focus of my research is the environment. This is an important topic in today's society and political climate as attitudes towards the environment are rapidly changing we are increasingly aware of our impact upon the planet. In the body of this exegesis, I focus on climate change and the growing global concern with environmental sustainability.

Overall, my research is interdisciplinary, drawing upon scientific research and fibre art processes to create a visual narrative, which aims to educate and promote discussion about the nuclear cycle and how it impacts upon the marine life and public health in the Northern Territory.

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1. Introduction

My Master of Arts thesis, *The Significance of Fibre Art - People, Place and Environment*, is the culmination of two years of practical and theoretical research. The thesis is comprised of two parts: studio based research, which culminated in the exhibition *Signs*, together with this 10, 000 word exegesis. The aim of my research is to provide a context and explanation for my studio practice through an exploration of the key issues which inform my art making.

This thesis builds on and expands upon the research undertaken as part of my Honors Degree in 2005 and 2006 which focused on uranium mining and the Commonwealth decision to create a dump for uranium waste in Central Australia. Researching issues in regards to the nuclear cycle globally as well as in the Northern Territory culminated in the exhibition *Journey into a Toxic Heartland* at the Charles Darwin University Gallery in June 2006.

The research I have undertaken for the Master of Arts Degree is a continuation of the exploration of environmental issues in relation to the nuclear cycle, culminating in the exhibition *Signs*, at Charles Darwin Gallery in February 2009. The exhibition explores and responds to issues relating to the nuclear cycle, with particular focus on the Darwin Harbour area and the potential threat that the transportation and processing of uranium and nuclear waste holds for marine life and public health.

My research focuses on the human relationship with the environment, which is an important issue in contemporary society. Attitudes are rapidly changing and we are becoming increasingly aware of our impact upon the planet. Until recently environmental issues were marginalized but have now taken centre stage with global warming now a mainstream issue of central concern to everyone. This was demonstrated on a national scale in relation to Australian politics with the election of a Labor government in November 2007 when Kevin Rudd replaced the conservative government of John Howard. One of Labor's key election promises was the signing of the Kyoto Protocol - a major turn around in the Australian government's attitude towards the environment.

Another focal point for my research is the potency of fibre art as a medium for cross cultural exchange between Indigenous and non-indigenous people. As a fibre artist and teacher for more than ten years, I have witnessed people weaving together to build strong platforms which abolish cultural rifts as well as rapidly transform the way that people relate to the natural world. Throughout the years, I have had many experiences learning from as well as working collaboratively with Indigenous fibre artists from throughout Australia.

Theoretical Framework

I argue that fibre art is an unassuming but powerful medium, which can contribute to political change by laying down platforms for discussion whilst bringing important issues to the public eye. In this exegesis, I will also demonstrate the role that fibre art plays in maintaining and preserving Indigenous material culture. Through cross cultural exchange Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians have intentionally as well inadvertently maintained and developed strong relationships with the environment and each other. Fibre art has been and continues to be an important medium that lays down an accessible platform for this to occur.

The emergence of Post Modernity in the 1960's and 1970's world art scene signified a major transformation in attitudes towards art making and what was recognized as significant art practice. This marked the beginning of a monumental shift from the celebration of the individual, the conqueror, masculine and scientific towards the acknowledgment and validation of collaboration, bringing the past to the present to address complicated social, political and environmental issues. (D'Allewa, 2005) This change in viewing art means people are increasingly welcoming towards Indigenous fibre art, which is feminine, and often celebrating the collective rather than the individual. Since the 1980s Indigenous artists have been involved in a process of cultural revival reinterpreting traditional forms and exploring new forms and materials. At the same time, fibre has become a vital and significant new medium for non-indigenous artists to consider postcolonial perspectives.

Fibre art brings women and Indigenous cultures into the present in a contemporary art context as valid cultivators of culture and custodians and keepers of the natural world, creating a link between the two after a long history of colonisation. Once discredited as women's work, fibre is now celebrated as a powerful medium. In the body of this exegesis I will explore key motivations towards this whilst exploring the positioning and context for my own practice.

Fibre art continues to perform an important role in Indigenous peoples' ceremonial and material culture. An example of this occurred in February 2008 when Ngambri elder Matilda House performed the first 'Welcome to Country' at Parliament House wearing a magnificent possum skin cloak made by Yorta Yorta artist Treahna Hamm (Plate 1) (www.guardian.co.uk). This event exemplifies the potency of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people working simultaneously to overcome this country's dark history so that positive movement can be made, where we work and learn together.

Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education defines the Both Way's philosophy as:

a philosophy of education that 'brings together Indigenous Australian traditions of knowledge and Western academic disciplinary positions and cultural contexts, and embraces values of respect, tolerance and diversity (Batchelor Institute 2007, p.4).

The history of fibre art demonstrates how this has occurred since the early 19th century, well before the development of a Both Ways philosophy as an education policy.

In her Doctor of Visual Arts thesis, 'Art Song: The Soul Beneath my Skin' Queensland artist Pamela Croft gives an explanation of the 'both ways' philosophy:

'Both Ways' or 'Two Ways' concept (incorporation of old way and new way) of Indigenous knowledge's, has emerged from post secondary Indigenous education, with theories of western action and research. 'Both Ways' position focuses on compatible aspects of each domain (Aboriginal and Western). The Both Ways system is best described as action, learning and research that builds critical thinking and confidence through action-reflection-understanding-action. Therefore it is a politically active paradigm and well suited for art practice. (Croft, 2003)

Croft demonstrates how the 'Both Ways' philosophy can be embraced by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people as an avenue for reconciliation. This is especially relevant to exchange through art, and the body of this thesis will demonstrate how fibre art developments in Australia are the embodiment of the 'Both Ways' philosophy.

Methodology

My creative practice is interdisciplinary using natural fibres, recycled materials and basket-making techniques along with alternative photographic processes. My research over the course of my candidature has involved a considered move toward a deeper exploration of the practice of installation using diverse mediums and techniques to create a visual narrative. Installations can operate as a metaphor, to communicate environmental concerns as well as lay down a solid platform for discussion and education. An exploration of installation practice in the Masters studio work provided a means of exploring abstract concepts in regards to environmental issues.

This thesis is an interdisciplinary research project that draws upon historical and theoretical material, referring to my involvement in fibre art projects undertaken within several Indigenous communities together with personal studio based skill development in response to my research and experiences. The exegesis draws upon art history and theory, anthropology and cultural studies to investigate the history of fibre as a medium for cross-cultural exchange. In turn this lead me to consider the historical role of the museum and part of my research has involved using the archives of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (hereafter MAGNT).

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 2, *Women's Work* lays down the foundations of this exegesis by giving an overview of the significance of fibre art to Indigenous people for practical as well as spiritual purposes. Styles and techniques used throughout Australia will be compared and discussed along with influences that have resulted in significant developments in approaches towards fibre art created by Indigenous people.

Chapter 3, *Saying it with Fibres* discusses the contemporary revitalization of fibre by Indigenous artists. My experiences from working collaboratively within Indigenous communities will also be discussed, drawing conclusions in relation to contemporary issues and how Indigenous and non-indigenous people exchange knowledge and respond to their direct environment.

Chapter 4, *Warning Signs*, locates the foundation of my creative motivations through a brief overview of major environmental issues that are of current global concern. The role of museums in relation to the influence they have upon artists will also be discussed along

with the research of professionals. One of these is Bart Currie, Head of the Tropical and Emerging Infectious Disease Division of the Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin, whose knowledge of box jellyfish in the Top End has informed my research on physiological and environmental issues. Artists who also respond to environmental issues such as Fiona Hall and Judy Watson will be discussed, giving insight into the way that artists can create visual dialogues that raise issues of environmental concern.

Chapter 5, *Making Shift*, involves a detailed discussion of the development of the exhibition *Signs*, which has been the focus of my Master of Arts studio research. This chapter will discuss the progression of my art practice towards the use of installation techniques to create visual narratives, comparatively discussing parallels with other artists such as Fiona Hall who use similar devices to discuss their environmental concerns. *Signs* is not only a response to local environmental issues but also a critique of Western attitudes towards the natural environment as they are reflected in museum archives.

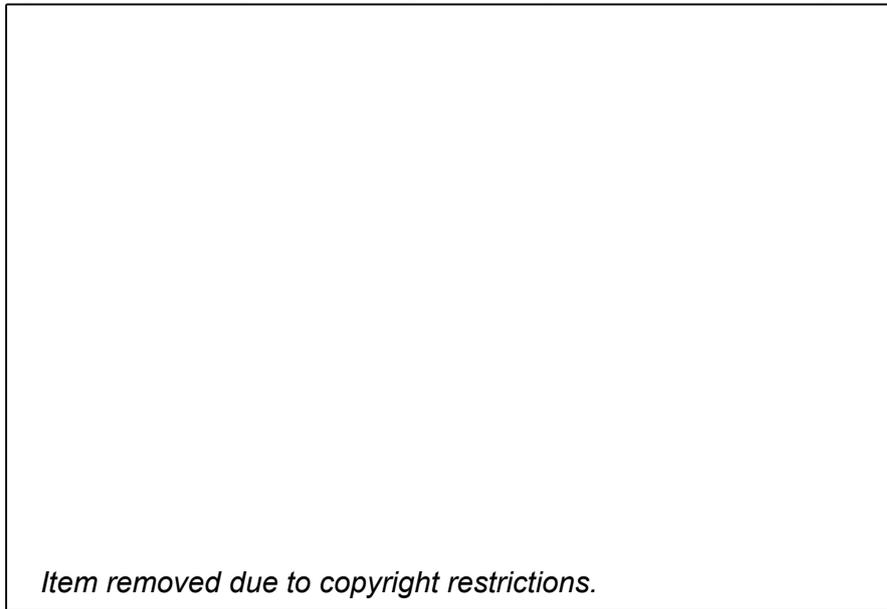


Plate 1: Matilda House with Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Opposition leader Brendan Nelson performing the first 'Welcome to Country' at Parliament House wearing a possum skin cloak made by Yorta Yorta artist Treaahna Hamm, Brisbane Times, February, 2008.

This chapter lays down a platform for understanding the importance of fibre art practice in Australia by providing an overview of the significance of fibre art to Indigenous people as an important component of their ceremonial life and material culture. Long before colonisation advanced, fibre work traditions existed and are still being practiced today in varying forms, often responding to the influence and impact of European contact. Since early European settlement there has been continuous cross-cultural exchange between the two, influencing developments in fibre art practice throughout Australia today.

Fibre objects are incorporated in the complex spirituality imbued in Indigenous culture and some sacred woven objects are known to be the embodiment of ancestral figures. Dilly bags can be seen in rock and bark paintings dating back through the millennia. An example of this can be found in Plate 2 where a lithograph by Kunwinku artist, L Thompson Yulidjirri from north east Arnhem Land depicts *Yingana*, an ancestral figure for the Kunwinku people. To the Kunwinku *Yingana* is an important ancestral figure whose journey resulted in the creation of the *Binninj* or Aboriginal people. *Yingana* emerged from the Arafura Sea, traveling inland and carrying many dilly bags upon her head that were full of yams. She scattered spirit children along the way whilst planting these yams. She gave the children different languages and these children are the ancestors of the different clans and language groups, which exist today in Arnhem Land. This print is based on an ancient rock painting found in the artist's homeland near Gunbalanya in north east Arnhem Land (www.injalak.com).

Basketry is a primary example of the interconnected nature of Aboriginal culture, in which everyday objects also have religious meanings. For example, fish traps hold great spiritual significance for people from Arnhem Land as these objects symbolically represent the function of replenishing and renewing of the human species. In ceremony, the entry of the fish to and from the neck like opening is compared to the sexual act, the process of birth, and the renewal of life itself (Isaacs, 1999). Special bags, painted and sometimes decorated with feathers were, and still are used in ceremonies. Feather *bathi* (baskets) are prized items to Yolgnu family groups used in circumcision ceremony and returned to safekeeping after the event (Morphy, 2008).

Regional Diversity

Indigenous fibre art practice and functionality in Australia has always been diverse and regional. For example, fibre work made by women from Arnhem Land is recognizably different when compared with fibre work made by Ngarrindjeri women from the Coorong region in South Australia. Throughout Australia the techniques used to produce fibre works as well as the objects made, the plant materials used and the significance of the woven objects varies from region to region.

Indigenous people in Arnhem Land produce a range of products from more than eighty plant species. Raw plant materials such as pandanas and sand palm are stripped, dyed and cooked with pigments made from tree roots, leaves and berries to achieve a range of colours from subtle to vivid, including purples, pinks, grey, green, orange and brown. The inner bark from the roots of the *Pogonolobus reticulatus* plant species also known as *Mandjurndum*. (Plate 3) in the Kunwinjku language are cooked on the fire to dye plant fibres such as pandanus a bright yellow. When ash from certain species of hardwood is added to the dye liquid, the plant fibres are transformed to a vibrant red colour (plate 4) (Hamby, 2005).

The dyeing of fibre works in this way only became possible once metal containers became available for the prolonged boiling of the fibres with roots, berries and leaves of certain plants. Before this colonial influence, ceremonial fibre objects were painted with ochre pigment and animal fat to depict clan designs and other important cultural knowledge. The introduction and transition into the use of plant materials for colour was initially sparked by the influence of Fijian missionaries stationed at Waruwi (Goulburn Island) in the 1920's who recognized similarities in plants found on the island with plants used for dyeing in Fiji. This knowledge was passed on by basket makers from Waruwi (Goulburn Island) to the mainland, where oral history and personal experimentation has resulted in the vast colour palette used in baskets across Northern Australia today (Hamby, 2005, p92). Examples of one of the most popular basket making techniques used across Arnhem Land known as twining are pictured in Plate 5, however the techniques and plants used as well as the objects produced, varies extensively throughout Australia.

People from the Central and Western deserts have traditionally used human hair, animal hair and plant fibres to make the *manguri* (Plate 6), a ring placed on top of the head to assist with the carrying of bark water containers. The nationally toured exhibition, *Manguri Weaving*, (2001) featured over eighty baskets and grass sculptures made by the Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara women of the Central and Western Deserts of Australia. Thisbe Purich discusses the importance of the *Manguri*:

How long has this shape been around? A very long time. You grab some grass or twigs, feathers or plastic bread bags, and make a circle. Then you wrap some twine made of hair, spun fur or bark, round and round. The *manguri* hair ring doesn't seem like an important object at first, after all, its only real purpose is to support *Pirti* (a wooden carrying dish) that you put on top of your head. Still, there's something about this object and shape. It sits proudly on the crown of the head, a position normally associated with power, status and pride (Purich, 2003, p4).

Women from the Central Western Desert region also make fibre objects such as hair belts, headbands, hair string skirts and shoes from bark and feathers for functional purposes such as clothing and food collecting as well as for ceremonial purposes. Basket making in the Desert regions is a fairly recent development, which is the result of cross-cultural exchange between Indigenous and non-indigenous women. This will be discussed further in chapter 3.

By contrast, Ngarrindjeri fibre artists from the Coorong region in South Australia predominantly use river rushes and a basket making technique known as coil stitching to make eel traps, mats and sister baskets that are comprised of two baskets stitched together with a handle. Queen Louise Karpeny was a well-known Ngarrindjeri weaver who often stayed at the Point McLeay Mission in the mid 1800s, where basket weaving was encouraged (Plate 7). She was also an important informant to Edward Stirling who was the director of the Museum of South Australia from 1884-1912. Whilst the topic of weaving, along with other domestic activities, has been neglected until recently by social researchers, it is significant that women important and knowledgeable enough to be key informants to anthropologists have often been weavers. (www.samuseum.sa.gov.au)

Her Story – Fibre and Cross -Cultural Exchange

Fibre has a long history of use as a medium that goes back in millennia in both Indigenous and Western cultures. Indigenous fibre art in the Northern Territory is widely known for its vibrant colours and extraordinary skill. What is less known is the developments and exchanges between fibre artists in the Top End and external influences which have seen changes and developments, some subtle, some major, in fibre art practice throughout Australia.

The connection between Waruwi (Goulburn Island) and cross-cultural exchange in regards to developments in Indigenous fibre art processes expands even further to designs and techniques used. A significant cross-cultural exchange occurred in the 1920s when missionary, Greta Matthews, transferred Ngarrindjeri basket-making knowledge of the coiling technique from the Coorong region in South Australia to Arnhem Land (Hamby, 2005 p82). Matthews was exposed to Aboriginal fibre work when her family were working as missionaries at the Malaga Mission with the Ngarrindjeri people of the Lower Murray and Cooyong region. Fibre artists from this region use river rushes and a basket-making technique known as coiled stitching to make baskets, mats, clothing and eel traps. (Plate 8) When Matthews's father died in 1902, she moved to the Northern Territory where she was a mission teacher with the Maung people at Waruwi (Goulburn Island) off the coast of North East Arnhem Land. Matthews transferred coil stitching basketry skills to the Maung people, which resulted in this technique being introduced to the Top End. (Plate 9) A recent touring exhibition, *Re Coil*, demonstrated the diversity of baskets being produced today using this technique. Curator Margie West discusses the catalyst for this development:

From her previous experience in South Australia, Matthews was obviously aware that this style of basket was highly marketable. When she arrived at Waruwi she found that the Maung women already had a rich tradition of fibre craft, making a variety of twined conical bags, mats, netted bags and fishnets. The Methodists, however, discouraged customary practice of any kind, preferring to inculcate western skills in European style basketry, sewing and embroidery. These items were also made specifically for sale to raise money for the community's education and housing (West, 2007, p14)

Customary practice was discouraged as the newfound techniques were considered more practical and marketable by the missionaries compared to the conical shaped baskets made using the twining technique. The Maung adapted the coiling technique by using the fibres found readily in their area, which was mainly pandanus. This new technique gave them freedom to experiment with design and form. A thriving trade existed and these baskets

produced from Matthews's influence were sent south and sold in museums and shops. The Maung people from Warruwi (Goulburn Island) taught people from surrounding communities and the knowledge spread across Arnhem Land. (Plate 10)

One of the oldest art forms to have retained its original purpose, fibre art acts as an important link for Indigenous people for maintaining cultural integrity. The nature of the medium lends itself to innovation and sharing, with knowledge and skills being easily transferred, translated and adapted. This has resulted in the vibrancy that exists in contemporary fibre art with a myriad of forms and mediums being explored. In the following chapter I discuss contemporary developments in fibre art.

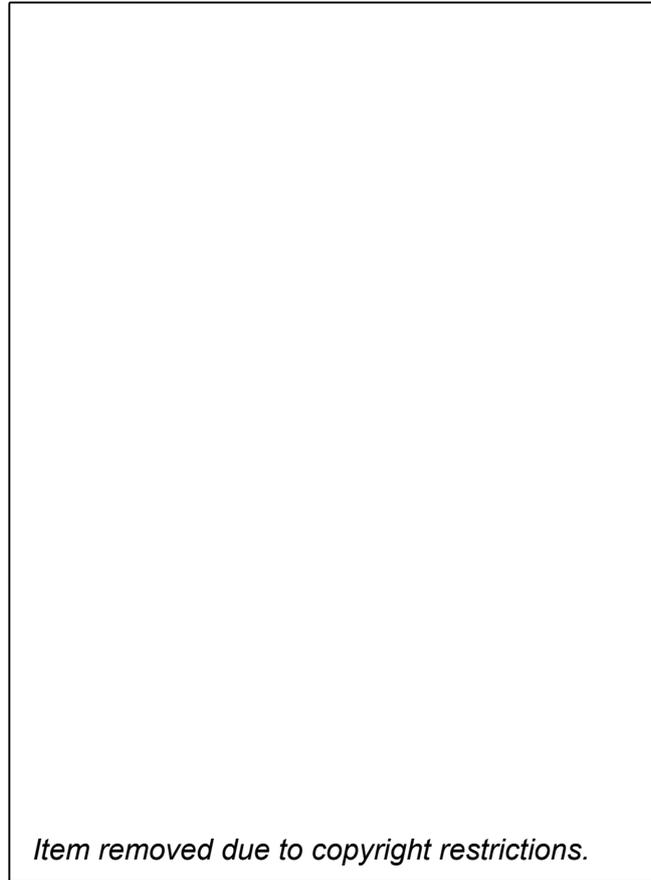


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Plate 3: The inner bark from the roots of Mandjurndum (*Pognolobus reticulatus*) are cooked on the fire to dye plant fibres a bright yellow. When ash from certain species of hardwood is added, the dye liquid and fibres are transformed to a vibrant red colour, 2008, Photograph courtesy of Zephyr I' Green.

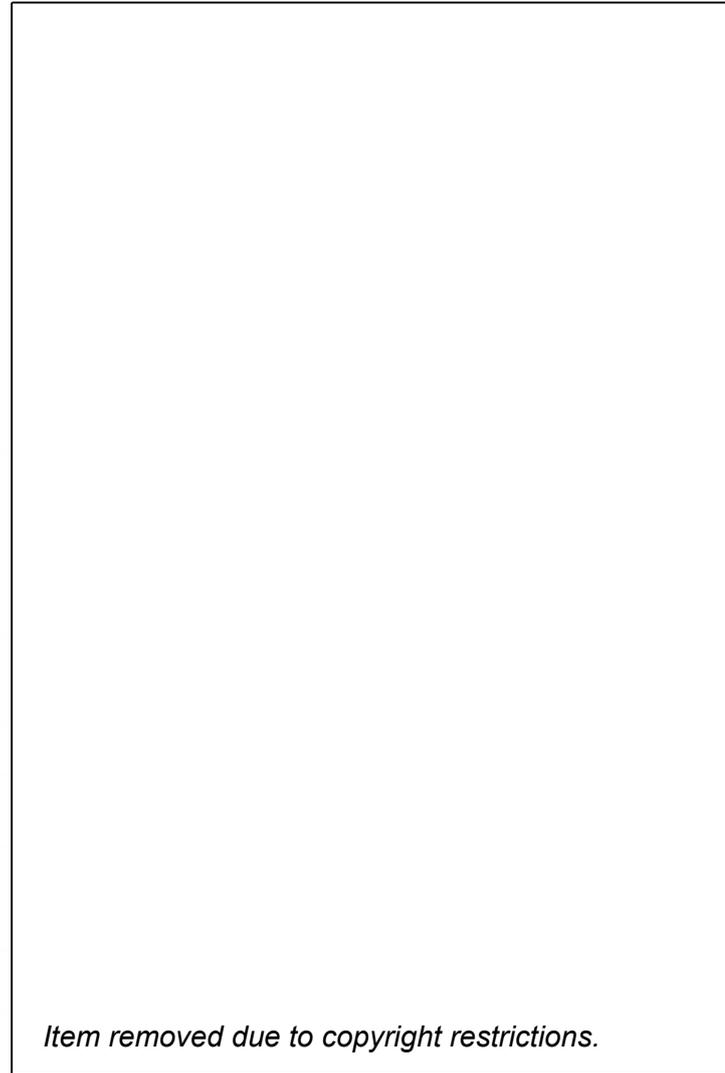


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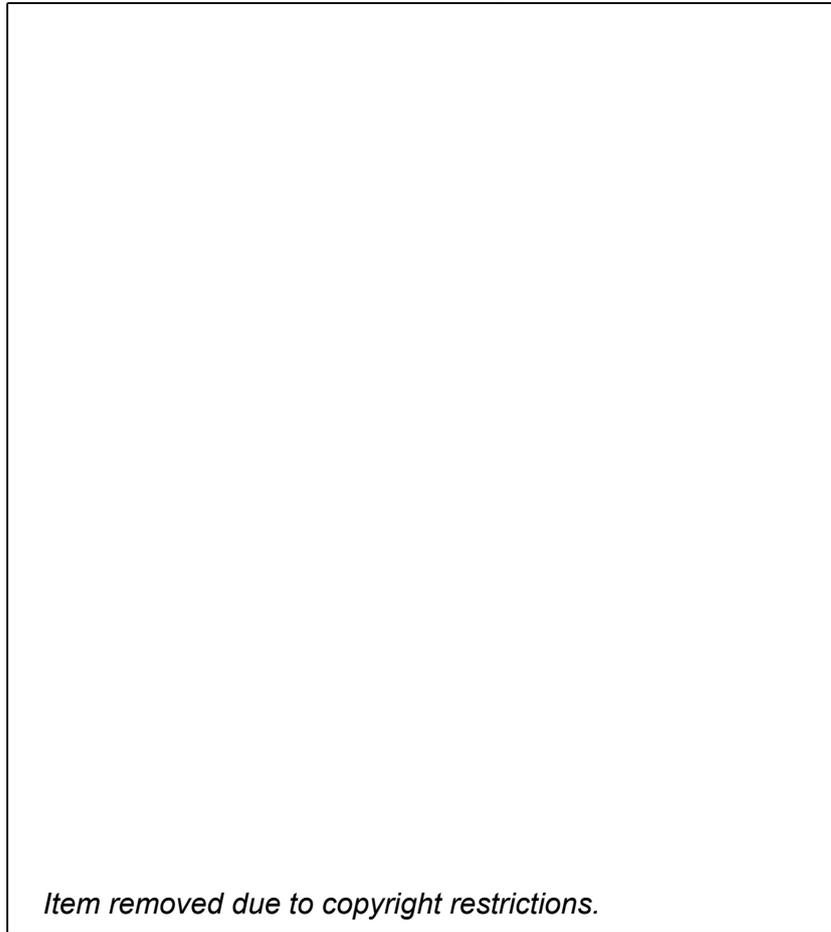


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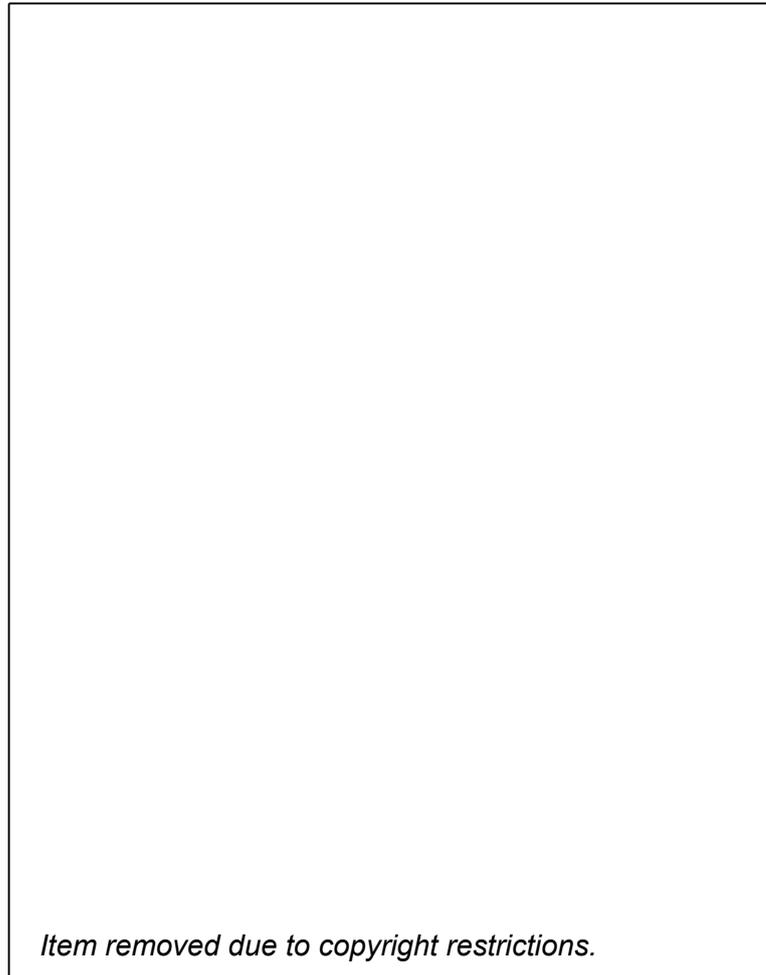


Plate 7: Louisa Karpeny and companion laden down with baskets, South Australia, 1915, South Australian Museum Angas Collection.



Plate 8: Artist Unknown from Echuca, Victoria, *Coiled Rush Mat*, 1890, made from river rushes, Gretta Matthews used the fibre object as a teaching aid on Goulburn Island to demonstrate new weaving techniques to the Maung people, Photograph by Rodney Start, courtesy Museum of Victoria and Injalak Arts and Crafts, reproduced from *Recoil, Changes and Exchanges in Coiled Fibre Art*, (ed.) Sue Basset, Artback NT, Australia, 2007, p15.



Plate 9: Doris Nayinggul, *Badjkid*, year unknown, dyed and undyed pandanas, 135mm x 245mm x 300mm. An example of how the coiling basket making technique used by Ngarrindjerri basket makers from South Australia was transferred and originally translated by fibre artists from Warruwi (Goulburn Island). Photograph by Rodney Stewart, Reproduced from *Twined Together: Kunmadj Njalehnjaleken*, (ed.) Louise Hamby, Injalak Arts and Crafts, Australia, 2005, p62.

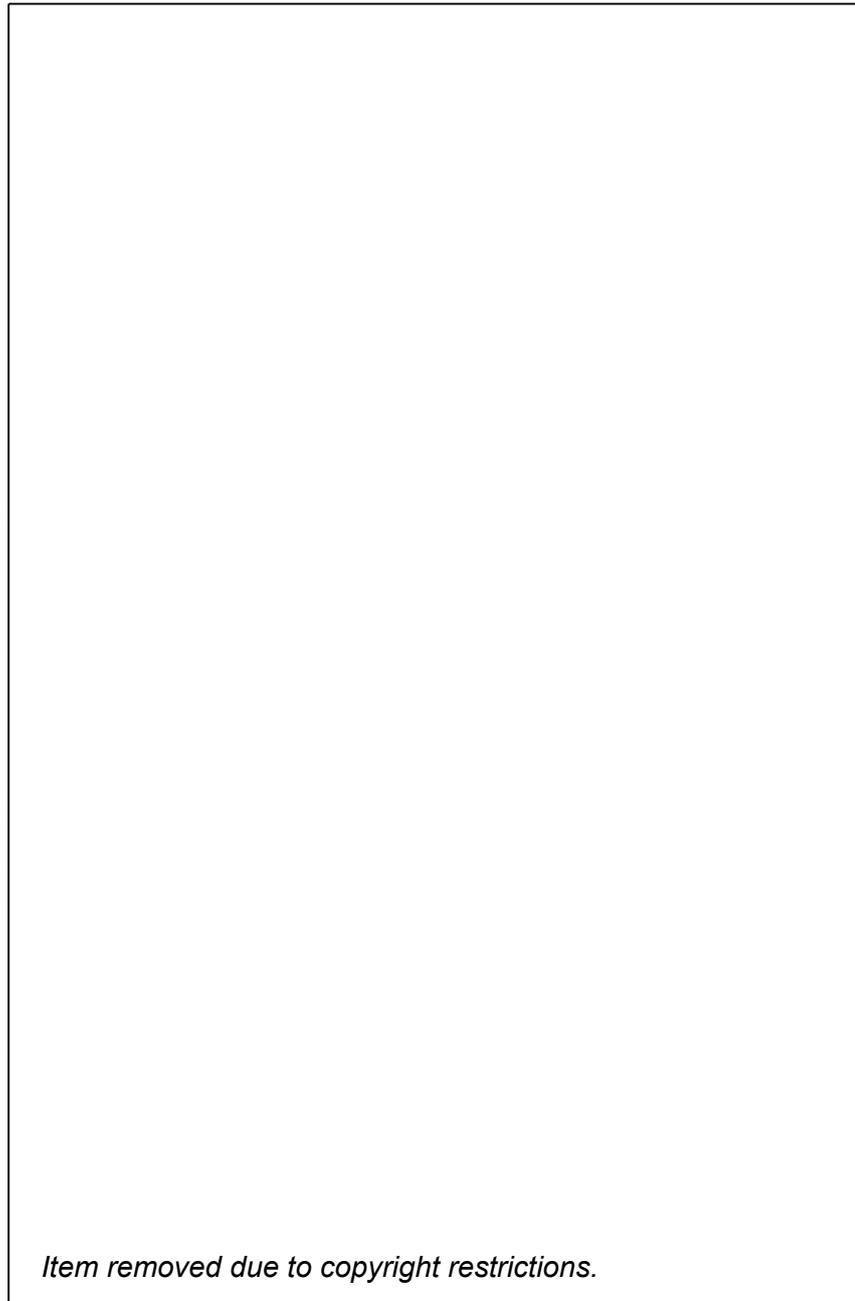


Plate 10: Artist Unknown, *Coiled Basket*, detail, an example of the vibrant patterns and variations in techniques evolving using the coiling basket making technique in Arnhem Land today. Reproduced from *Twined Together: Kunmadj Njalehnjaleken*, (ed.) Louise Hamby, Injalak Arts and Crafts, Australia, 2005, p184.

2. Women's Work

This chapter will examine contemporary developments in fibre art as well as discuss key artists who have influenced the fibre art movement in Australia. The reasons for the ongoing evolution of fibre art are many including the need to create, continue or reestablish cultural links with people and places. Examples of the ability of cross cultural fibre projects to effectively link the past with the present through story telling and working collaboratively will be provided through details given on my involvement in many projects with Indigenous communities. This included projects involving the Tjanpi Desert Weavers from the Central and Western Deserts, the community school at Waruwi (Goulburn Island) in Arnhem Land as well as a multi-disciplinary project at Utopia in Central Australia.

Branching Out

Until recently fibre work and women's work in general has been marginalized as craft and deemed as less significant in comparison with other art forms such as painting. Since the 1970s however, fibre art has undergone a transformation and celebrates increasing popularity. Margie West who was the Curator of Aboriginal Art and Material Culture at MAGNT, comments:

Across the tropical and desert regions of the Northern Territory a quiet revolution is taking place in the most neglected and least understood area of Indigenous creativity-in women's fibre practice. While we may consider this region 'remote', it is the homeland of diverse cultural groups who express their identity through even the ordinary things they make. Objects, people and the environment are inextricably bound together by ancestral agency and 'string' is the metaphor often used to describe these interconnections (West, 2007, p28).

Indigenous fibre artists at the forefront of contemporary developments such as Lena Yarinkura have led this reception supported by curators and researchers in the field such as Margie West and Louise Hamby along with non-indigenous fibre artists like Nalda Searles. Their work has laid down an understanding and appreciation for the richness and diversity of contemporary fibre expression across Australia. Today fish traps are made and used by Indigenous people for use in many different contexts; in ceremonies, in trade and as part of a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. In the wider community, they are appreciated as fine art sculptural pieces collected in galleries and seen in contemporary contexts such as the fish traps from Maningrida installed in Casuarina Shopping Centre, Darwin.

Fibre plays an integral role in positioning female Indigenous artists as important creators of significant artwork expressed from a female perspective, depicting cultural stories, as well as contemporary issues that affect them today. This transformation is exemplified by the Tjanpi Desert Weavers who won the 2005 National and Torres Strait Islander Art Award (NATSIA) with their large fibre sculpture, *Grass Toyota* (Plate 11), a full size Toyota sculpture made by forty women from the Central and Western Deserts.

At the time of the award art critics such as Nicholas Rothwell questioned whether *Grass Toyota* was worthy of the prize, describing it as ‘neither beautiful, nor true - it is simply a pile of vaguely car-shaped grass’ (Rothwell, 2005). Susan McCulloch (2005) responded, pointing out, that such critical commentary follows the exhausted pathways of the art/craft debate. Critics such as Rothwell fail to recognize the exciting history and developments in fibre art as a medium in Australia that has resulted in Indigenous women working collaboratively, using materials that they are familiar with from their cultural background and surrounding environment to reflect upon relevant contemporary issues.

The *Grass Toyota* epitomises the way that fibre art practice today embraces the conceptual along with the practical and spiritual in Aboriginal society. It metaphorically expresses the means by which Indigenous people maintain their connection to their culture and Country through the use of the Toyota as a means to travel to remote and important sites of cultural significance as well as hunt and collect food and art materials. The *Grass Toyota* is a creative, tangible manifestation of the ‘Both Ways’ philosophy as the artists weave their story of contemporary Indigenous life whilst intertwining issues which are significant to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Rothwell’s criticism exemplifies the limitations placed upon Indigenous people through unrealistic and stifling expectations of what Indigenous art is and should be.

One of the most important Indigenous artists who has led the process of revival and innovations in fibre art is Lena Yarinkura, a Rembarrnga woman from Maningrida. Lena Yarinkura who lives on an outstation outside Maningrida in central Arnhem Land has branched out with her own contemporary interpretations of traditional materials. After mastering the basket making techniques involved with making the conventional range of twined pandanus baskets and string weavings, she adapted these techniques with wit and ingenuity to make life-size woven sculptures, taking Arnhem Land fibre work in an exciting new direction (www.qag.qld.gov.au). This resulted in a number of exhibitions dedicated to fibre sculptures in Major galleries and now Maningrida has a strong reputation as a centre for innovative fibre art production (www.craftaustralia.com.au).

Yawk Yawk (mermaids) are a recurring theme for Yarinkura. These enigmatic female water spirits inhabit several sites in freshwater streams and pools, and one of these lies in the artist's mother's country at Bolkdjam. With a fish tail, and long hair resembling trailing blooms of green algae, they are similar to the European idea of a mermaid. Yarinkura's *Yawk Yawk* (Plate 12) is made of pandanus strands dyed with local bush dyes in a loose, twined technique. The body is stuffed with paper bark to which bound pandanus fibre arms are attached.

Using pandanus to make contemporary art forms such as camp dogs and mermaids, Yarinkura invokes contemporary and traditional stories from her life as an Indigenous woman living in north east Arnhem Land. She is a groundbreaking artist who is celebrated and recognized for her skills, being the recipient of awards such as the NATSIA 3D Art Prize in 2002. Further developments in her artwork has seen her woven figures cast in bronze, immortalizing that which is in essence ephemeral, giving fibre art a permanence and respect which has in the past been reserved for 'high art'.

Inspired by Yarinkura's successes other artists have been experimenting with techniques to make fibre sculpture. More recent developments have seen two dimensional fibre sculptures by Kunwinjku artist Marina Murdilnga who created the first flat *Yawk Yawk* (Plate 13) made from knotted pandanus on a jungle vine frame painted with natural pigments. Her second *Yawk Yawk* dyed with pandanus and adorned with feathers created a great demand from collectors and galleries. In turn, she too inspired several other artists who continue to use this particular technique to create not only *Yawk Yawks* but other animals such as birds and marine life.

Weaving Together

In the 1970's skills development projects funded by the Australia Council (West, 2007) saw the development of 'adapted' craft enterprises on new and existing skills in crafts such as weaving, batik and pottery. The interrelationship between western and Indigenous craft-based practice was consolidated after this as it marked the beginning of workshops and exchanges between non-indigenous and Indigenous crafts people, resulting in the

innovative fibre art practice which exists throughout Australia today. Margie West discusses this in the exhibition catalogue for *Re Coil*:

In the aftermath of the craft revival in the 1970s, the popularity of hand-made textiles generally was in decline. By the 1990s, this trend was being rapidly reversed, particularly by Indigenous women who were enthusiastically embracing new skills and sharing them as a matter of course among close kin and other relatives. The recent emergence and proliferation of small Indigenous economies based on collective fibre practice, in many ways mirrors the growing professionalism and skills-sharing within the Australian textiles movement, generally (West, 2007).

An example of cross-cultural exchange in recent times can be found in the evolution of fibre art practice in the Central and Western Deserts. Since its emergence in 1995, the Tjanpi Desert Weavers, an arts employment program within the NPY Women's Council, has made a huge impact on people's lives. Tjanpi (meaning grass) began as a series of basket-weaving workshops led by non-Indigenous fibre artists Nalda Searles, Renata Cross and Thisbe Purich in the desert community of Papulankutja in remote WA. From here women taught each other.

In *Object* magazine (2005) Kevin Murray, an independent writer and curator who was the Executive Director of Craft Victoria for seven years writes about the importance of fibre work in the process of cross-cultural exchange:

Trade in Baskets is thriving. But it's not just cash that's being exchanged. Baskets are a currency for new dialogues that are bringing people and cultures together (Murray, 2005, p18).

Similar to the way information regarding the coiled stitching techniques and dye plant knowledge spread across Arnhem Land, this new found weaving wisdom was rapidly disseminated. Today close to 400 women across 3 states and 28 communities are weaving baskets and fibre sculpture. Working with fibre in this way has become firmly embedded in Western and Central Desert culture. The fibre art tradition that has emerged from the desert demonstrates how quickly and easily women teach and learn from each other to share skills and express their identity, celebrating diversity and innovativeness through the myriad of stories which can be woven from grass and string.

In March 2007 I was invited to Adelaide to work on a collaborative project with the Tjanpi Desert Weavers for the World of Music and Dance Festival (WOMADelaide) held in the Adelaide Botanic gardens every year in March. The Tjanpi Weavers created an installation (Plates 14-16) consisting of a typical desert camp scene. In The Australian Forum for

Textiles magazine I described the scene where a central figure, a big bosomed matriarch, kept a stern eye on things, making sure the camp dogs didn't humbug and the children were getting plenty of bush tucker. (de Groot, 2007, p37).

The camp scene installation had a 'behind the scenes' story of its own. For two weeks prior to the festival a group of artists, fifteen from South Australia, four from interstate including myself and one from New Mexico, sat with six Tjanpi weavers at the Parks, Arts and Functions Complex in Enfield, Adelaide as a part of the WOMADelaide Desert Weavers project. Projects of this caliber reflect the increasing recognition of fibre art as a medium for cross-cultural exchange and understanding. Through innovation and collaboration, friendships are forged, ideas developed and an ancient art form maintained.

The installation involved a series of life-sized figures seated in a bush-like setting surrounded by camp dogs, woven utensils such as a billy can and bush tucker, which are essential and every day items in Indigenous life. The installation itself along with the collaborative and cross cultural processes involved with its making is a pertinent example of the Both Way's philosophy in action. Indigenous and non-indigenous people exchanged skills and worked together to create art work educating both cultures about Indigenous life in the Central Desert as well as involving Indigenous cultural practice in a contemporary context.

As discussed non-indigenous people from Greta Matthews onwards have often played the major role as catalysts and influences in the process of cross cultural exchange leading to contemporary developments in fibre art. One major figure at the forefront of developments in regards to contemporary fibre art and cross-cultural exchange is Western Australian fibre artist, Nalda Searles. Her long creative career has fostered relationships with Indigenous people from throughout Australia and her achievements as an artist and a tutor make her a widely celebrated fibre artist.

After her initial exploratory research with fibre in the early 1980s, Searles commenced teaching and learning through bush camps that have sparked and inspired fibre art careers for many people throughout Australia. I first met Searles at the Adelaide Fringe Festival in 2001 at *Entwined*, a fibre mentorship program. This experience had a profound effect on me as I was surrounded by Indigenous and non-indigenous artists from throughout Australia and overseas who were teaching and learning a myriad of basket making styles and plant usages. Searles' passion for fibre and her endless curiosity and playfulness assisted in a realisation of the endless possibilities for fibre as a medium as I recognised

her long journey using fibre as a means for creating a relationship with the land and with the Indigenous owners of Country.

In 2003 Searles was involved in *The Seven Sisters* exhibition, a collaborative exhibition incorporating artworks from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous fibre artists. A major work in this exhibition was *The Seven Sisters* which consisted of a series of seven, life-sized fibre figures (Plate 17) made by Indigenous fibre artists: Ivy Hopkins, Kantjupayi Benson, Jean Burke, and Elaine Lane and non-Indigenous artists, Nalda Searles and Thisbe Purich. The seven figures represented the seven stars found in the Pleiades constellation representing the Pitjantjatjara story of the Kungkarangkalpa sisters.

Searles discussed her ideas in an opening speech for *Threads of Colour* (2003), an exhibition of fibre works by non-Indigenous fibre artists from the Top End, at Fremantle Arts Centre in 2003: She said:

The exhibition could just as easily be named Threads of Language. Charles Perkins once wrote to the effect that true reconciliation will not occur in this country until all its inhabitants are proud to be able to speak an Aboriginal language... the women who developed *Threads of Colour* show how we can search for an understanding of the language of this land through the involvement of learning the manners in which plants and the colours extracted from them have been used for generations by Indigenous people and then applying their own interpretations to these treasure find (Searles 2003).

In her philosophy, Searles recognizes the need for non-Indigenous Australians to create relationships with this country and its Traditional Owners in a personal, creative way.

Warruri (Goulburn Island) continues to be a key location for cross-cultural exchange. In June 2007, I was invited to participate in a fibre art project with local artists Ralph Gurmurdul and Rosemary Koruna, school children (Plates 18-21) and the community of Warruwi in a week's fibre art workshop. This resulted in woven sculptures linked to the Crow story, an important bird on the Island. The week -long project involved making crows, sea animals and sea birds that are all an integral part of the creation story for the island. The project was interdisciplinary, with the proceedings documented and filmed by the secondary school students. At the end of the week, at a special school assembly attended by community members, the crow story was retold by a community elder along with a display of the students' artworks.

Projects like this are becoming increasingly common with fibre being recognized as a powerful medium for education and story telling. Evidence of this was compounded when I

was a guest lecturer along Yolgnu fibre artists Anne and Elaine from Galiwinku (Elcho Island), at the Australian Association for Environmental Education (AAEE) conference, which is the premier professional association for those who work in environmental education and sustainability. This was facilitated by Birut Zemits and Hosted by Charles Darwin University (Plate 22). Under a Banyan tree in the CDU grounds, Anne, Elaine and I shared traditional and contemporary basket making skills with national visitors, many of whom said it was an amazing experience, sourcing materials from the natural environment to make art objects using ancient and innovative basket making techniques.

In August 2008, I was invited to participate in another interdisciplinary project at Arlparra which is in the heart of the Utopia region, 270 kilometres north east of Alice Springs. The aim of the project was to respond to requests by Indigenous Elder women from Arlparra who required support with documenting bush medicine knowledge so that it could be preserved and passed on to younger generations.

In response to their request, lecturers from the Central Australian campus of Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE) working in Own Language Work and Visual and Contemporary Arts, in association with youth media trainers from the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA), began collaborating with the community to document this important area of traditional knowledge. This project occurred over 12 months and involved a number of elements: storytelling, printmaking, fibre and film making.

Linguists Gale Woods, Margaret Carew worked with the women from Arlparra to document their bush medicine stories and songs through film and voice recordings. The women then translated the bush medicine stories into mono prints with lecturer in Art and Craft, Jenny Taylor. The fibre art element of the project that I participated in (Plates 23-28) involved making two dimensional fibre sculptures in response to a print by Rosie Ngarray Kunoth that depicts an important bush medicine story.

At the beginning of the project, the young men and women as well as elder women and I listened to a recording of Rosie Ngarray Kunoth telling the bush medicine story in the Anmatyerr language. The teenage boys created wire armatures for the figures, as the girls and women worked together stitching and covering the figures with local grasses. In the process different styles emerged, some in an invented technique as a means of covering the wire quickly and effectively. The project also resulted in video animation, which told the bush medicine story using still photographs of the figures to create the narrative. The short film

turned out to be another very innovative example of how materials sourced from the land can be used by Indigenous people to celebrate their art, language and land. Everyone was very excited by the outcome which culminated in the exhibition *Intem-antey anem: These Things Will Always Be*, which was launched at the Araluen Art Gallery (Plate 29) in Alice Springs and is destined to tour the Northern Territory and Nationally in 2009.

Fibre is increasingly being recognized and utilized as a medium for education and cultural revitalization. Contemporary developments in fibre art have resulted in innovative expressions of the art form that are consistently surprising and dynamic such as *Grass Toyota* by the Tjanpi Desert Weavers. This has occurred in a number of ways, whether it be within individual art practices such as that of Maningrida artist, Lena Yarinkura, or through cross cultural and multi-disciplinary projects such as that initiated by Indigenous women from Arlparra and facilitated by Batchelor Institute. My experiences from working collaboratively within Indigenous communities collecting and weaving their stories metaphorically as well as literally demonstrate the increasing popularity and importance of fibre art as a medium, which is forging cross-cultural relationships as well as celebrating women's work and the land from which the materials are sourced. In the next chapter I will expand upon the inherent relationship between fibre art and the environment. As both art materials and subject matter, plant materials are often sourced from fibre artists' immediate surrounds and used as a medium to express their relationship with a place. In contemporary society, environmental issues are increasingly impacting upon our lives and many artists are responding to this through their art.



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Plate 11: Tjanpi Desert Weavers, *Grass Toyota*, grass, found objects, 2005, variable dimensions, Photograph by Thisbe Purich, reproduced from *Woven Forms*, (ed.) Brian Parkes, Object: Australian Centre for Craft and Design, Australia, 2005, p 39.

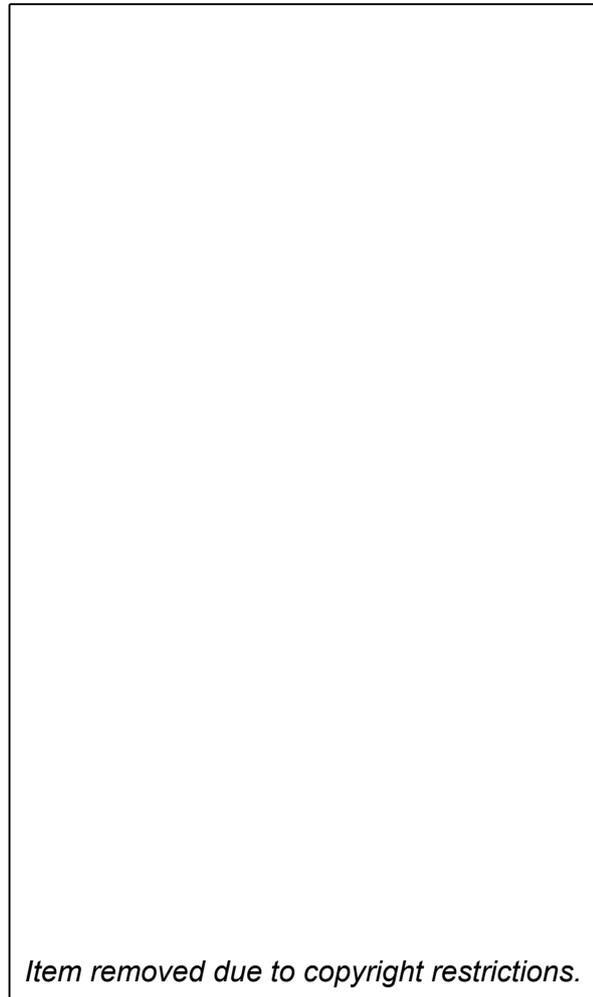


Plate 12: Lena Yarinkura, *Yawk Yawk*, 1998, paperbark, pandanus, natural pigments, feathers, 210mm x 560mm x 920mm, Image courtesy of National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.



Plate 13: Marina Murdilnga, *Yawk Yawk*, 2007, dyed and undyed pandanas, 1730mm x 600mm, www.maningrida.com/exhibition, accessed 12/10/08.

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Plates 14-16: Tjanpi Desert Weavers project for WOMAdelaide, Adelaide Botanic Gardens, 2007, photographs courtesy of NPY Women's Council.



Plate 17: Ivy Hopkins, Nalda Searles, Kantjupayi Benson, *The Seven Sisters*, detail, 2003-2004, mixed desert grasses (*minarri*, *wangurnu*, *yilintji*), raffia, string, recycled wool, onion grass, desert sticks gifted from Kantjupayi Benson, grey blanket wool, life size, reproduced from *Seven Sisters- Fibre Works Arising from the West*, (Ex. Cat), Craft West, Australia.

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Plate 18 - 21: Warruwi Community School, 2007, students participating in fibre art project, photographs courtesy of Warruwi School.



Plate 22: Weaving workshop at the Australian Association for Environmental Education (AAEE) conference at CDU, Darwin, 2008.

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Plates 23-28: Various Artists from Arlparra working collaboratively to produce two dimensional fibre works and short animated film for the exhibition *Intem-antey Anem: These Things Will Always Be*, Photographs Courtesy of Batchelor Institute for Indigenous Education, 2008.

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Plate 29: *Intem-antey Anem: These Things Will Always Be*, exhibition view, monoprints and two-dimensional fibre sculpture, Araluen Art Gallery in Alice Springs, 2008, Photo: Aly de Groot.

3. Saying it with Fibres

In recent years, attitudes towards the environment have changed dramatically making it a major political and social issue, both nationally and worldwide. My personal concerns for environmental issues spans more than a decade through my involvement in environmental campaigns which successfully ceased clear felling logging in old growth forests in Western Australia in the 1990s. More recently, the environment has become a major focus in my artwork with this thesis focusing in particular on the impact of nuclear issues upon the Northern Territory. This chapter will examine environmental issues globally and locally and the art practice of several contemporary Australian artists who also respond to the environment through their art making.

A strong history of environmental activism exists in Australia with the first direct action protest occurring in 1979 at Terania Creek in northern New South Wales (Plate 30). Often referred to as the 'rainforest war' this marked the beginning of environmental protest in Australia. The Rainforest Decision (1982) marked the eventual cease of logging of about one third of state forests in New South Wales (Turvey, 2006, p21). Since then a culture of activism has emerged in Australia, which has seen many people actively protesting to create awareness about local and global environmental issues.

A Heated Debate

What has been debated and denied for a long time is now accepted by most as scientific fact. The green house effect, - a natural warming process in the earth's atmosphere - has been amplified since the industrial revolution two centuries ago (Flannery, 2006). This is causing the earth's surface to heat further, resulting in climatic changes such as erratic rainfall patterns, increases in the sea temperature, extreme weather conditions and rising sea levels. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has predicted an average global rise in temperature of 1.4°C to 5.8°C between 1990 and 2100 (www.koshlandsciencemuseum.com). The IPCC is a scientific intergovernmental body set up by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO).

This is a global environmental crisis and climate change is already presenting environmental as well as financial challenges in Australia and overseas. Government policy and funding is geared towards educating people to use less fossil fuel and to become 'climate clever'. This means reducing our intake of fossil fuels (www.climatechange.gov.au). Internationally the Kyoto Protocol was adopted for future

implementation on 11 December 1997 by the 3rd Conference of the Parties, which met in Kyoto, and it came into force on 16 February 2005. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change describes the objectives of the agreement to achieve “stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system” (www.unfccc.com).

To date 183 countries have signed the Kyoto Protocol which aims to have the industrial world to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 5.2 per cent by 2012, with targets set according to each country's pollution level. As discussed previously, the Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd ratified the Kyoto Protocol on 3 December 2007. The previous Prime Minister, John Howard had refused, justifying that it would cost Australia employment opportunities. Many Australians rallied against Howard's reluctance which left Australia and America as the only two developed nations that had not signed the agreement (*Age*, 24th May, 2005). Currently there is much dispute about Rudd's decision to only reduce carbon emissions by 5% by the year 20/20. This is being criticised as a token effort and many people are disappointed and view Rudd's election promises as superficial. (www.theaustralian.news.com)

Environmental activism involves the nexus between local and global issues. In the research for my Masters Degree I have focused on a key local environmental issue -uranium mining. Nuclear power is a major global issue and is believed to be a positive solution towards global warming. Nuclear power is deemed by many to be a viable alternative to coal as an energy source. It is considered 'green' as nuclear power does not produce as much carbon emissions as coal but this is debatable when we consider the full impact of the nuclear cycle including mining, processing and waste disposal. Australia currently supplies 24 per cent of the world's uranium (<http://www.world-nuclear.org>) and with nuclear power hailed as a positive solution towards global warming, this demand is only increasing, thus making the Northern Territory a focus of debate concerning the side effects resulting from the many aspects of the nuclear cycle.

Rich deposits of uranium exist throughout northern Australia, including Arnhem Land and the Central Desert region. In the Northern Territory, there is a long history of uranium mining, with the first uranium mine established at Rum Jungle, 120km south of Darwin in the 1950s. Hence, uranium mining and more recently uranium dumps are a point of conflict and concern between mining companies, politicians, Traditional Owners and

environmentalists and constantly discussed by the media. (www.ecnt.org).

My Honours Degree exhibition in 2006, *Journey into a Toxic Heartland* (Plate 31) responded to issues surrounding the threat posed by the federal government for a nuclear waste dump in remote areas of Northern Australia. This exhibition questioned the way in which the then federal government, denied relationships of place and the long-standing connection of Indigenous people to the land, which strongly reflected previous attitudes of colonisation where this country was originally claimed as *terra nullius*. Through the use of fibre and alternative photographic processes, I responded to opposition leader Dr Brendan Nelson's comments on dumping nuclear waste in the NT where he says:

Some people need to take a reality check...there is absolutely no room for mucking about now...why on earth can't people in the middle of nowhere have low level and intermediate nuclear waste, Dr Nelson, MP, Lucas Heights, July, 2005)

Twelve figures woven from introduced and Indigenous plant materials were suspended from the ceiling. The use of Indigenous and introduced plant materials reflected the fact that the health of the land is important to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike and it is for this reason that we must unite in regards to this issue. Titled, *People in Nowhere*, it outlines the absurdity of Brendan Nelson's attitude to view the Northern Territory as an uninhabited wilderness where there would be no serious repercussions from a nuclear waste dump. This attitude wreaks of the same ignorance that justified nuclear testing in Maralinga in South Australia in the 1950's which is still presenting adverse social and health issues to the Indigenous inhabitants of the area.

Today nuclear power is still an issue creating divides between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities alike (Plate 32). Currently a proposal is being considered for a uranium processing plant to be sited at Middle Arm Point in the Darwin Harbor area. (*NT News*, October 2007). The response of Emma King, a representative for the Environment Centre of the Northern Territory (ECNT), indicates the real environmental concerns:

That would have very grave implications for the health of the harbor given the issues of what they would do with the waste and the tailings, which would include radioactive elements. Waste products from processing the ore are inevitably going to contain radioactive elements (King, 2007).

Supporters of nuclear power do not agree. World Nuclear Association Director-General John Ritch, defended his industry as being unfairly tainted by "one of the most

exaggerated events in human history" (*Age*, August 5, 2006) Mr. Ritch said Australia's political and geological stability made it an ideal home for a nuclear waste repository.

Donna Jackson, director of Larrakia Nation, the peak representative organization for the Traditional owners of Darwin, also holds grave concerns for the harbour region :

The Larrakia Nation opposes the Arafura Resources proposal for a uranium processing plant on Middle Arm...these (and other such developments) could cut off access to beaches and resources which have been used by Larrakia and locals for generations. (Nuclear Territory News, October 2008, p4)

As Darwin grows and develops as a city, decisions are being made which impact upon the fragility of the environment as well as the quality of life for Darwin residents. I therefore continue to confront issues regarding the nuclear cycle in my recent Masters studio work so as to explore these environmental concerns.

The studio and theoretical research which culminated in the exhibition, *Signs*, at Charles Darwin University Gallery in February, 2009, therefore centralized around concerns held by environmentalists for the safety of the Darwin Harbour area and possible threats to marine life due to the transportation of nuclear waste by sea as well as the possibility of uranium being processed in the area.

The seawaters around Darwin are home to many species of marine life, including *Chironex fleckeri*, which is commonly known as the box jellyfish, a dangerous species of jellyfish found in Northern Australia's oceans between the months of September and May. Box jellyfish are impossible to see because of their transparency and warning signs can be found along Australia's northern beaches boldly illustrating the perils that will be encountered if you dare to stray into the water. These signs informed one theme within my final exhibition, *Signs*.

Last wet season I happened to see my first box jellyfish as I was crossing the Rapid Creek bridge in Darwin where the salt water meets the fresh water. This was a revelation of sorts because although I have lived in the Northern Territory for twelve years I have never seen these mysterious yet deadly creatures that lurk beneath the surface in Northern Australian seas.

This experience was a catalyst for my research and I began to use transparent fishing line to experiment with the shape and form of jellyfish as another element to my artwork. The research of Professor Bart Currie, Head of Tropical Infectious Diseases at the Menzies School of Health at Charles Darwin University enabled me to further understand the true form of several species of box jellyfish found in Australia's tropical waters. Currie is well known for his research on box jellyfish species found in Australian waters. *Chiropsella Bart* is a species of box jellyfish recently named after Currie. His research demonstrates that the increase in box jellyfish populations in tropical waters may be a major indicator of environmental stress (Gershwin, 2007). With rising ocean temperatures box jelly fish numbers are increasing and this may cause them to migrate further south for breeding. Another researcher in this area Louise Gershwin has focused on *Georginia rifikanae*, a single tentacled jellyfish found only in the Darwin Harbour area. Their insights have allowed the jellyfish to become a central focus in my studio research.

Another major environmental problem found locally and globally are the drift nets that are the debris from the fishing industry. In north east Arnhem Land, Yolngu people living in coastal areas are adversely affected by the destruction caused by these nets (Plate 33). These nets, which can be up to ten kilometers in length, are caught in the cycles of the tides, repeatedly washing ashore, with marine life such as turtles and fish trapped within. Indigenous rangers are working to remove these nets from their beaches permanently through initiatives such as the Ghost Net Project (www.ghostnetproject.com.au).

The Ghost Net Project is an initiative arising from the desire of rangers and people from Dhimurru and surrounding Indigenous communities in the Gulf of Carpentaria to remove ghost nets or drift nets from their beaches. The possibility of utilizing these nets as a resource as a means of educating the broader population about the problems the nets create has been explored at the Garma Festival in North East Arnhem Land - an Indigenous festival aimed at sharing knowledge and culture organised by the Yothu Yindi Foundation.

In August 2006 the Festival hosted an art competition to give people the opportunity to experiment with making artworks from the nets. Some of the artworks entered in the competition included hammocks and kitchenware. The prizewinner was Chantal Chorday who produced a woven guitar strap using material from drift nets. Chorday is now exploring the possibility of making guitar straps on a commercial scale and she has been involved in workshops teaching Indigenous people how to utilize the drift nets to make art objects (www.garma.telstra.com). Experimentation with drift nets and other oceanic

rubbish to create woven forms has become an integral element in my final installation *Signs* (Plate 34). I have also been invited to work with several Indigenous communities in the Torres Strait and Gulf of Carpentaria to work collaboratively with artists making works from recycled fishing nets.

Art and Place

A number of contemporary Australian artists are concerned with environment issues. One artist whose artwork has directly referenced drift nets or ghost nets is Judy Watson, a Waanyi artist from North Queensland. Judy Watson draws her creative inspiration with a direct response to the land as a sculptor, printmaker and painter. She lived and worked in Darwin for five years where she was a practicing artist and teacher as well as the curator for an exhibition of Maningrida fibre artists, *Bush Colours*, in 1995. Her other achievements include numerous residencies in Italy, India, France, Hawaii, America and Samoa and in 1997 she co-represented Australia at the Venice Biennale with Emily Kane Kngwarreye and Yvonne Koolmatrie. Her 1998 mixed-media painting *Driftnet* (Plate 35) responds to issues surrounding the environmental destruction these nets create. The acrylic painting is comprised of pigment on string and features a row of string made from paper bark string using a traditional string rolling technique.

Watson explains the work:

Driftnet references the destructive nature of those nets that entrap turtles and dolphins indiscriminately. It also alludes to my practice as an artist, traveling, collecting information, materials and meaning from places other than my own country. It holds the weave, the threads of cultural knowledge, and a catcher of thoughts like a spirit net. I have twined and woven the stringy bark with a dilly bag stitch to represent a net held across a watery expanse, evoking notions of fluidity and visceral passages (Watson, 2000, p88).

Watson's artwork exemplifies an inherent connection and response to the environment. *Driftnet* demonstrates an affinity between fibre and the environment as Watson uses an ancient fibre art technique to address contemporary environmental issues, bringing to the fore the inherent reliance that Indigenous people (and ultimately all people) have on the survival of marine life.

Watson consistently uses mixed media such as plant fibres along with earth, pigments, wax, shellac, water colours, oxides, ink, charcoal and even blood to create raw, textile-like paintings and installations. Watson's artworks are a journey, documenting her experiences and relationship with her 'heartland' and assisting in her exploration of her environment so she can make sense of and connect with her surroundings and cultural history. Watson's

deep love and commitment to her culture and environment is reflected in her choice of subject matter as well as her choice of mediums. Her use of fibre art techniques in an unexpected context reflects a cross disciplinary approach which makes powerful commentary on the effects of industry upon Indigenous peoples lives and the environment.

Fiona Hall is another leading Australian contemporary artist whose experimentation with techniques and forms to express her curiosity and concerns with 'humanity's relationship with nature' (Ewington, 2008, p141). In *Fiona Hall: Force Field*, the exhibition catalogue for a recent retrospective of her artistic career spanning four decades, Hall discusses her use of museums as a reference point for her own inspiration:

Maybe it's a sign of the times that we're all now very conscious of the mega environmental issues we've created. Up until recently environmental concerns weren't in the public mind- the global public mind. It's this along with a burgeoning interest in all sorts of natural history, that's led me to spend a lot of time hanging out in museums. It's made me think more about how one can make artworks about the extraordinary world we live in, and also highlight the incredible fragility of the global ecosystem and the problems that are, in large part, of our own making (Hall cited by Ewington, 2008, p54).

Mourning Chorus (2007) is a wonderful example of Hall's commitment to the environment. This artwork also reflects her use of museum archives to communicate her concerns. The work involves a series of recycled plastic bottles formerly used for various poisons and cleaning products bottles (Plates 36, 37). Hall has attached skulls and beaks modelled in resin of eleven extinct birds indigenous to New Zealand to these recycled plastic containers. The research for this project was conducted during residencies at the Te Papa Tongawera Museum of New Zealand in Wellington, the Auckland Museum and the Australian Museum in Sydney. Hall used her residencies at the museum to examine skeletons and archives in order to accurately recreate the birds' beaks (McLisky, 2008). *Mourning Chorus* is characteristic of Hall's practice where her representations of flora and fauna reference the museological practice of collecting and preserving species that are now extinct and can only be accessed through museum archives. Previously only scientists used museums but now artists conduct research in these archives to inform their art practice. By referencing museums in their work, artists can evoke a scientific, detached attitude towards nature encouraging the viewer to reconsider how they perceive the natural world. Thus, many of Hall's works are often presented in shelves and glass cabinets that detach the viewer from the objects, encouraging them to question their own relationship with the subject matter.

At the heart of these debates is our relationship with the land. There are ironies and contradictions to be found within the Western depiction of the Australian landscape. The landscape was and is a key theme in Australia but this tends to be romanticized and skin deep. While the landscape is a symbol of national identity and pride, in reality a great many people have little relationship (and any desire to harbor one) with the true nature of the land.

This direct use of raw material can be powerful as it penetrates deeper than many romantic and whimsical projections of the Australian bush. This is particularly relevant in today's social and political climate where environmental issues have become a critical issue. Artists such as Judy Watson and Fiona Hall source materials and subject matter from the direct environment to create artwork that reminds us of our complex dependency on the health of the natural world. Many artists are doing this through research in science museums to explore our link to our environment. The following chapter will discuss the methodologies I have utilized to manifest the skills developed and understandings established through studio and theoretical research.



Plate 30: Protestors at Terania Creek, 1979, Photograph courtesy of Nigel Turvey, *Rainforest Wars*, Glass House Books, Brisbane, Qld., 2005, p28.



Plate 31: Aly de Groot, 2006, *Journey into a Toxic Heartland*, exhibition view, mixed media, variable dimensions, Photo by Fiona Morrison.

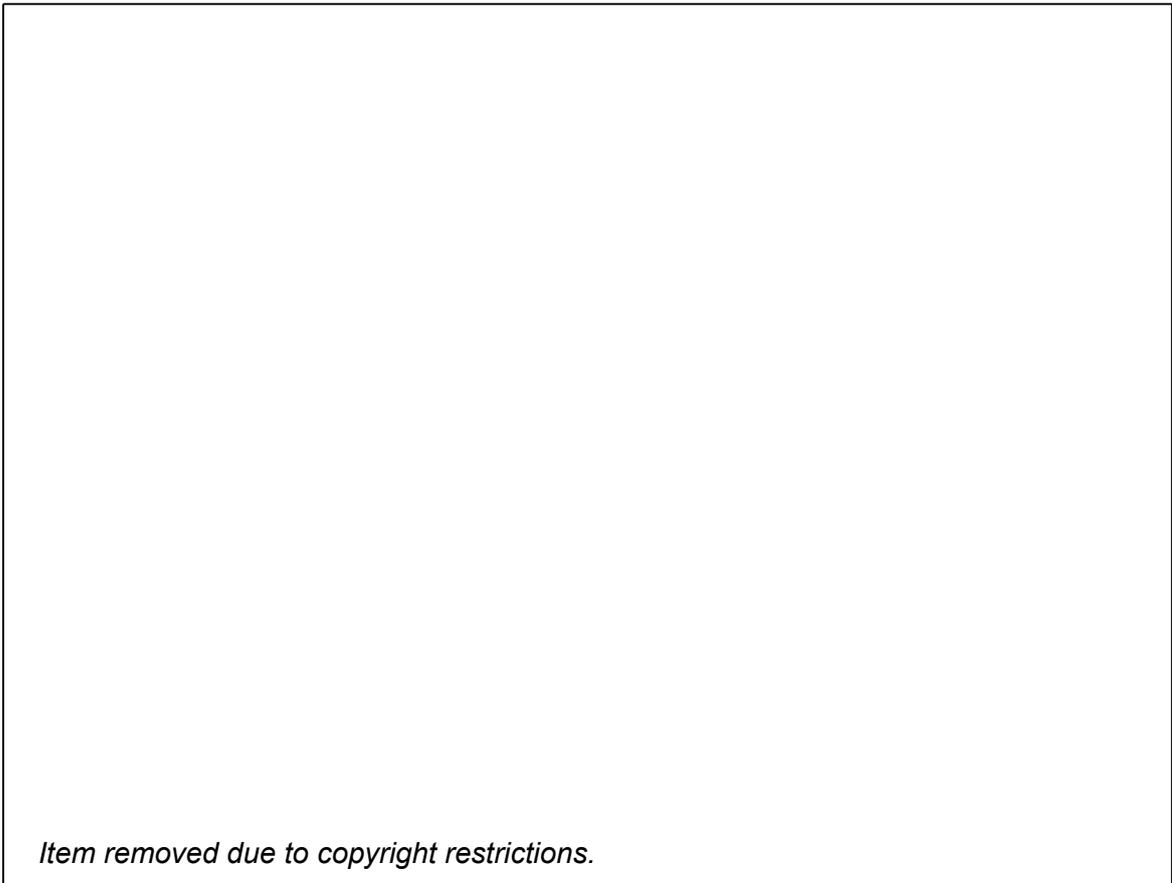


Plate 32: Protestors at Crown Plaza, Alice Springs, 2008, during Senate enquiry into nuclear waste dump policy, Photo by Aly de Groot.



Plate 33: Hawkesbill turtle caught in discarded fishing net at Cape Arnhem, 2001
Photo Djawa Yunupingu, Director of Dhimurru Land Management Aboriginal
Corporation, reproduced from Ghost Net Project website-www.ghostnets.com.au,
accessed 12/12/08.



Plate 34: Aly de Groot, *Ghost Net Baskets*, 2007, recycled fishing nets, fishing line, waxed linen thread, driftwood, variable dimensions, photo by Fiona Morrison.

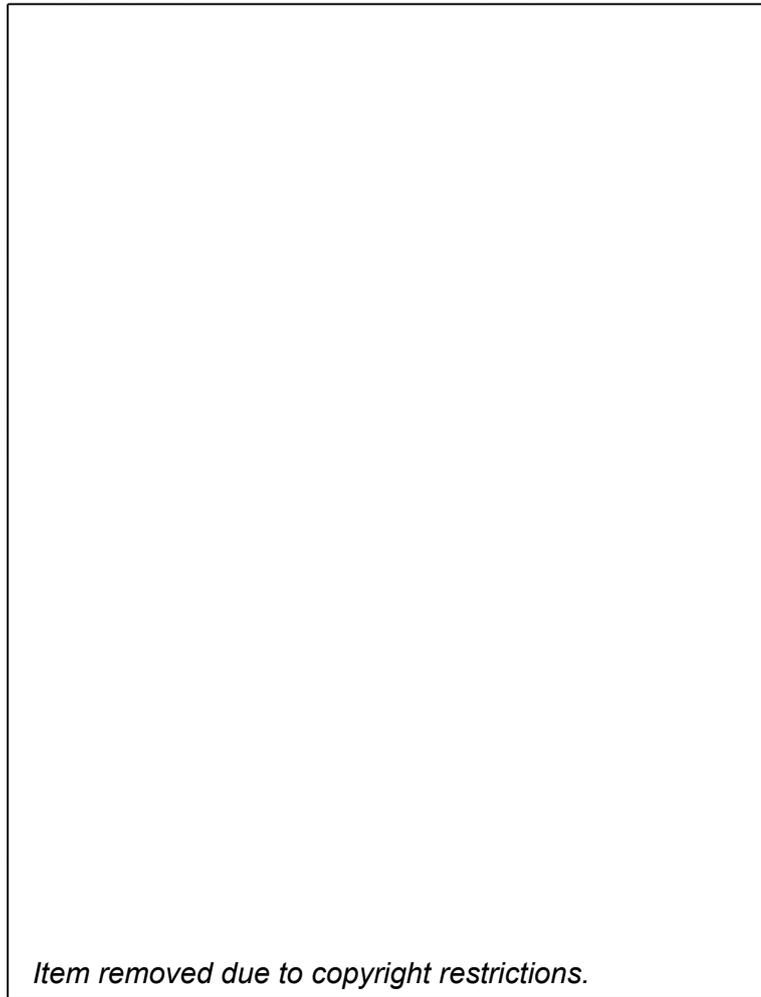


Plate 35:Judy Watson, Driftnet, 1998, pigment, cotton, chord, on canvas, collection of the National Gallery of Victoria.



Plate 36, 37: Fiona Hall, *Mourning Chorus*, 2007, detail, resin, plastic, vinyl, electronics, vitrine, variable dimensions, Photo courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia

4. Warning Signs

5. Making Shift

The research for my Master of Arts Degree involved developing a deeper understanding of installation practice, along with field trips to the museum and involvement in fibre art projects with Indigenous people. This interdisciplinary approach has resulted in work exhibited in several small exhibitions and a final installation titled *Signs*. This chapter will discuss the progress of my studio practice over the course of the degree, giving insight into the intent and meaning of the research I have conducted.

Since 1994 I have been experimenting with basket making techniques to make art objects. Over the years my work has increasingly leaned towards the abstract, experimenting further with materials and form to make sculpture and baskets that are increasingly conceptual rather than functional. An example of this is the work submitted for my undergraduate degree in 2005, titled *Too Hard Baskets* (Plate 38). Made from plant materials as well as car tyres, bones and recycled wire, their intent was to question environmental issues.

My art practice has moved away from discrete objects displayed on plinths toward installations. *People in Nowhere* (Plate 39) exhibited at CDU Gallery in 2006 as part of my Honours Degree marked my initial experimentation with installation as discussed in chapter 4. In the studio practice for the Master of Arts Degree I decided to pursue this shift away from discrete art object toward installations because I wanted to experiment with the impact created through experimentation with the positioning of objects within a given space.

In addition, the installation allowed me to explore the tensions created between objects when they are given the opportunity to 'speak to each other'. Through this process I hope to instigate a dialogue between the audience and the installation. This influences the way the work is read by the viewer rather than just simply being objectified as aesthetic item on display in a museum or gallery.

In my research on installation I have drawn upon the writing of John Coleman who says:

The specificity of a particular sight/ location is, I believe, a woven container of associations... a fluid mix of the physical, emotional, personal, social and political. This fabric is non-linear: extending inwards, and out. The present is written upon by its inhabitants: all of us containers ourselves (John Coleman, 2000, p28).

Coleman discusses the way installations can effectively channel an artist's experiences with places on many levels, whether it be with a particular site or experiences of a place, as in *Signs*. Within my work lies an inherent hope that it will resonate with my personal experiences of people and place. As such, it is personal, social and political through the visual metaphors I have created.

In recent years, a great many artists work in installation. Fiona Hall, discussed previously in chapter 4, not only draws upon museum archives but also adopts particular techniques to create narratives which influence how the viewer experiences the artwork. In *Mourning Chorus (2007)* the series of eleven extinct birds are contained within a coffin-shaped glass box which is covered in delicate native New Zealand plant foliage reproduced in vinyl cut-outs. The birds laid out in the glass box randomly light up as if suddenly flickering to life and a complex circuit of wires below the coffin appears to connect the 'birds to the earth, as though allowing the toxic liquid to drain into the ground, causing further destruction' (McLisky, 2008, p14). The meaning of the artwork is reinforced by the symbolism used in the installation and the techniques used in the artwork. For example, the glass case triggers association with coffins which alludes to death and mourning. Studying Hall's work encouraged me to experiment with the inherent meanings and symbolism associated with the positioning and presentation of objects.

Following on from my Honours studio work, *Journey into a Toxic Heartland* at CDU Gallery in 2006, I have continued to explore issues surrounding uranium mining. On the commencement of my research, a solo exhibition, *The Inevitable* (Plate 40), marked the beginning of experimentation with man-made materials including fishing line and ghost nets to focus attention on the deadly box jellyfish.

In *The Inevitable* more than 100 jellyfish woven from fishing line were scattered throughout the gallery suspended from the ceiling, at Darwin Visual Arts Association in March 2007. These represented the several species of box jellyfish which are Indigenous to the Top End and act as a metaphor for the fragility of the marine eco-system and the environmental concerns we are facing as a harbour city which is developing quickly and therefore facing industrial decisions such as the possibility of uranium being processed in the Darwin Harbour region. In *The Inevitable*, a series of seven *Ghost Net Baskets* were exhibited below the woven jellyfish. These were exhibited together because turtles are one of the only predators for box jellyfish and the turtles are threatened by the ghost nets.

Through further exploration, I have expanded upon *The Inevitable* with practical and theoretical research, using the exploration of installation practice in my studio practice as a means of exploring concepts in regards to the environment. The installation, *Signs* is intended to operate as a metaphor, to communicate environmental concerns as well as express experiences between people and place. In so doing I hope that the installation will create a platform for discussion and debate. The exhibition involved several groups of works positioned within the CDU gallery to create an installation as a material manifestation of my practical and theoretical research. The major theme of *Signs* is my response to planned industrialization in the Darwin harbour area and the threat that this holds for marine life and Darwin residents.

An important element to consider with regard to installation is the utilization and appropriateness of space. The use of the CDU Gallery had its advantages and challenges. The space is a single, white walled room approximately 10 metres by 5 metres in size. This is ideal as it provides an open platform for strategically placed artworks to resonate and create a dialogue with the viewer. However, one problem with this space is the stained cement floor, which unfortunately was unable to be repainted or resurfaced. I did consider temporarily covering the surface with sand, but decided against this as I thought this might have ambiguous connotations and detract from the original message of the installation.

Signs is also concerned with an earlier masculine, scientific, approach towards the natural world as the categorized and ordered specimens found in museum archives. Research for this installation involved several visits to the natural science section in the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (Plate 43) where there are large collections of the diverse species of flora and fauna found in the Northern Territory. It was here that I discovered how box jellyfish are preserved and labeled in jars for scientific documentation of the species. This was a means of ascertaining where particular species are found by documenting their habits and habitat and the documentation of new species. Accessing the museum advanced my research by providing the opportunity for me to gather more information about the appearance of the box jellyfish -an opportunity not available to me in nature. I was also intrigued by the process of preservation and how the creatures were stored in jars of water and alcohol.

By taking photographs and developing these back in my studio, these visits opened out possibilities and materially assisted in resolving many problems with regard to the representation of the jellyfish in my studio practice as a metaphor for the danger and

suffering the human species will encounter if we continue to ignore the warning signs in regards to environmental issues.

A key element in *Signs* is a series of jars (Plate 43) installed on shelves in a metal cabinet, mimicking the categorizing approach I witnessed at the museum. I have titled this series *Mutant Species*. The jars contain objects woven from fishing line that represent the several species of box jellyfish found in the Darwin Harbor and surrounding tropical seas. The jellyfish are woven from fluorescent monofilament (fishing line). They have a luminescent glow about them and are scientifically labeled similar to how I observed the labeling of box jellyfish species in the museum. They are dated 2012, to portray future potential threat of radiation and pollution from the processing of uranium and transportation of nuclear waste.

The artwork questions the threat of nuclear disaster and reflects upon prevailing attitudes which don't accept community based environmental concerns until they are scientifically proven. Many skeptics denied and criticised the imminent threat of global warming until it reached undeniable proportions. *Mutant species* poses the question, would we need radioactive marine life to understand the preposterous notion of nuclear energy as a viable solution to global warming?

Additionally on the walls of the gallery are several two- dimensional artworks. One print series titled *Exposed*, (Plate 44) represents jellyfish using an alternative photographic process known as cyanotype. This results in a ghostly image. This is a mild form of photographic chemistry that is photosensitive, therefore changing colour and capturing the basic image of objects when exposed to direct sunlight. Ironically, following the Chernobyl disaster, a nuclear reactor accident in the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in the Soviet Union in April 1986, pastoral lands surrounding the area were dyed blue as this same chemistry was used to neutralise the radioactivity.

The series of prints represent several species of box jellyfish found in the area of the Darwin Harbour. These images were formed from jellyfish woven from fishing line placed directly onto paper and cloth treated with the cyanotype chemistry and the exposed to direct sunlight. Using cyanotype as a medium *Exposed* explores the fragility of the human condition as well as marine life. I wish to create awareness of these issues because, just like the box jellyfish, which lurk in our tropical waters during the wet season, the issues

they raise are often below the surface and remain unseen and hidden from view (Gershwin, 2005, p86).

Along the opposite wall from *Exposed* are *Warning Signs* (Plate 45) comprised of eight stencilled images in enamel on board, based on the box jelly fish warning signs found throughout Northern Australia. They warn potential (male) swimmers of the hazards that lurk in our warm tropical waters if they enter the water between the months of May and September. These signs take on a more sinister meaning in the context of the exhibition, where they stand as warnings against the threat of the potential dangers of the nuclear cycle. *Warning Signs* questions the human inclination to deny the 'warning signs' until the damage is irreversible. They express my concerns that we may not accept the potential threat until it is too late when it becomes an accepted scientific fact.

Diagonally opposite and adjacent to the gallery entrance hang *Box Jellyfish*, a cluster of jellyfish woven from monofilament (fishing line), of variable sizes, mediums and colours. These figurative sculptures explore the three-dimensional space of the exhibition. Their tentacles expand and spread across the floor, forcing the viewer to be touched by the tentacles. By identifying and interacting with these figures I hope that they will create in the viewer a responsibility toward the issues. Critical commentary from the second examiner included concern about the tentacles trailing across the floor as an Occupational Health and Safety issue. Subsequently this artwork was selected as one of the 100 finalists out of 850 entrants for the Waterhouse Natural History Art Prize. When the artwork was exhibited for this prize at South Australian Museum in Adelaide in 2009 (where it came third place in the competition), the curators expressed the same sentiments. The work was installed with a small flat plinth underneath which I believe completed the effect of the overall artwork by creating more shadows as well as strengthening the positioning of the piece within the exhibition (Plate 46). I have therefore learnt a great deal more about curating installations as a result of the examination and exhibition process.

Each element in this exhibition has a separate message and together they form a narrative which encompasses the past and the present to address issues which need to be considered in regards to our nuclear future. Through mimicry of museum archives, *Signs* (Plate 47) demonstrates an urgency to address and consider the warning signs now, rather than waiting for environmental concerns to become scientific fact when it may be too late. The exhibition poses the question, do we need to have environmental catastrophe before the risks are considered? Will we continue to behave like the human figures, *The Tourists*,

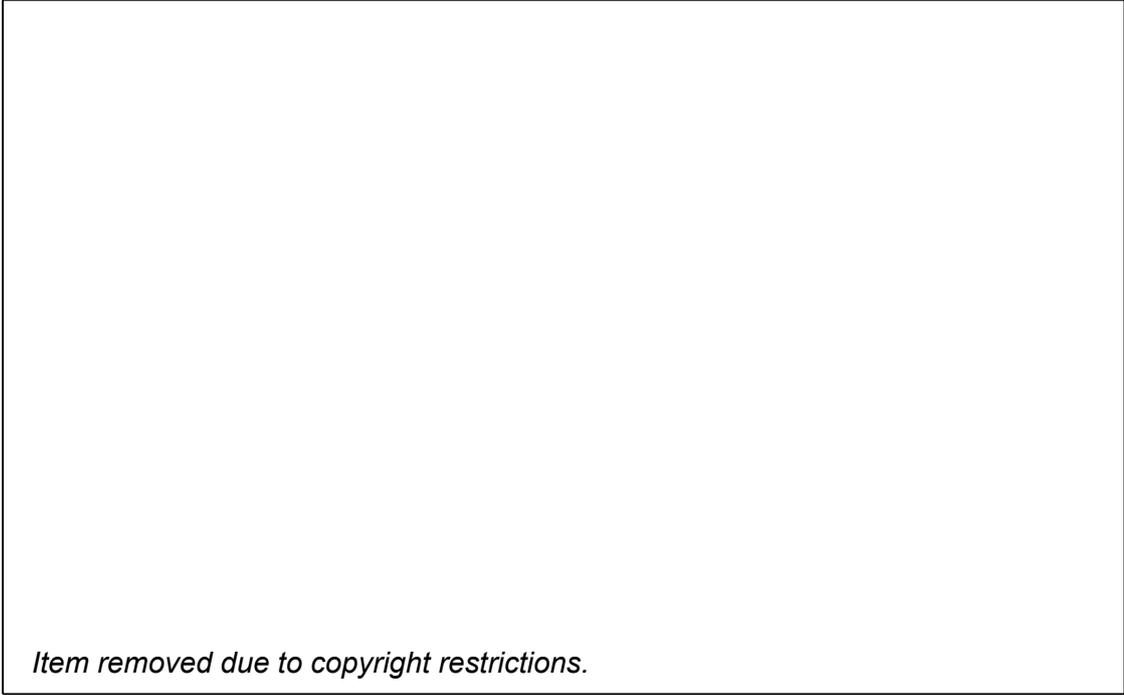
(Plate 48) who are unaware of the dangers and therefore stung by the jellyfish whilst walking into our warm oceans, blissfully ignoring the warning signs? Together the separate elements in *Signs* form a narrative, building a platform for dialogue concerning the Northern Territory government's continued support of uranium mines and related processes .



Plate 38: Aly de Groot, *Too Hard Basket*, 2005, plant fibres, found objects, tree sap, 380mm x 28mm x 18mm, Photo by Fiona Morrison.



Plate 39: Aly de Groot, *People In Nowhere*, 2006, dyed and undyed pandanas, variable dimensions, Photo: Fiona Morrison.



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Plate 40: Aly de Groot, *The Inevitable*, Exhibition view, 2007, Photo by Fiona Morrison

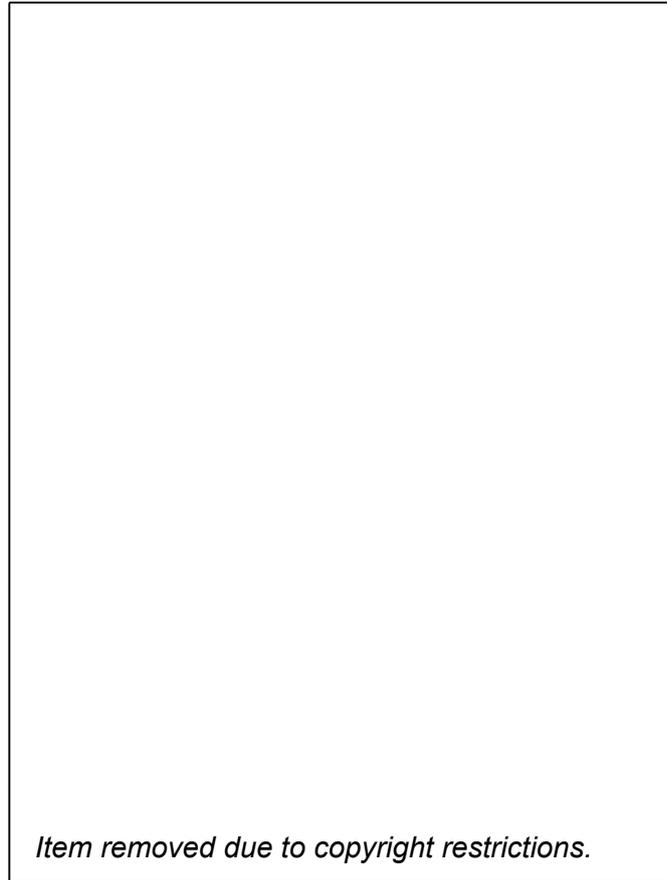


Plate 41: Species samples of various animals preserved in alcohol and water as witnessed in scientific archives at MAGNT, 2007, Photo by Aly de Groot.

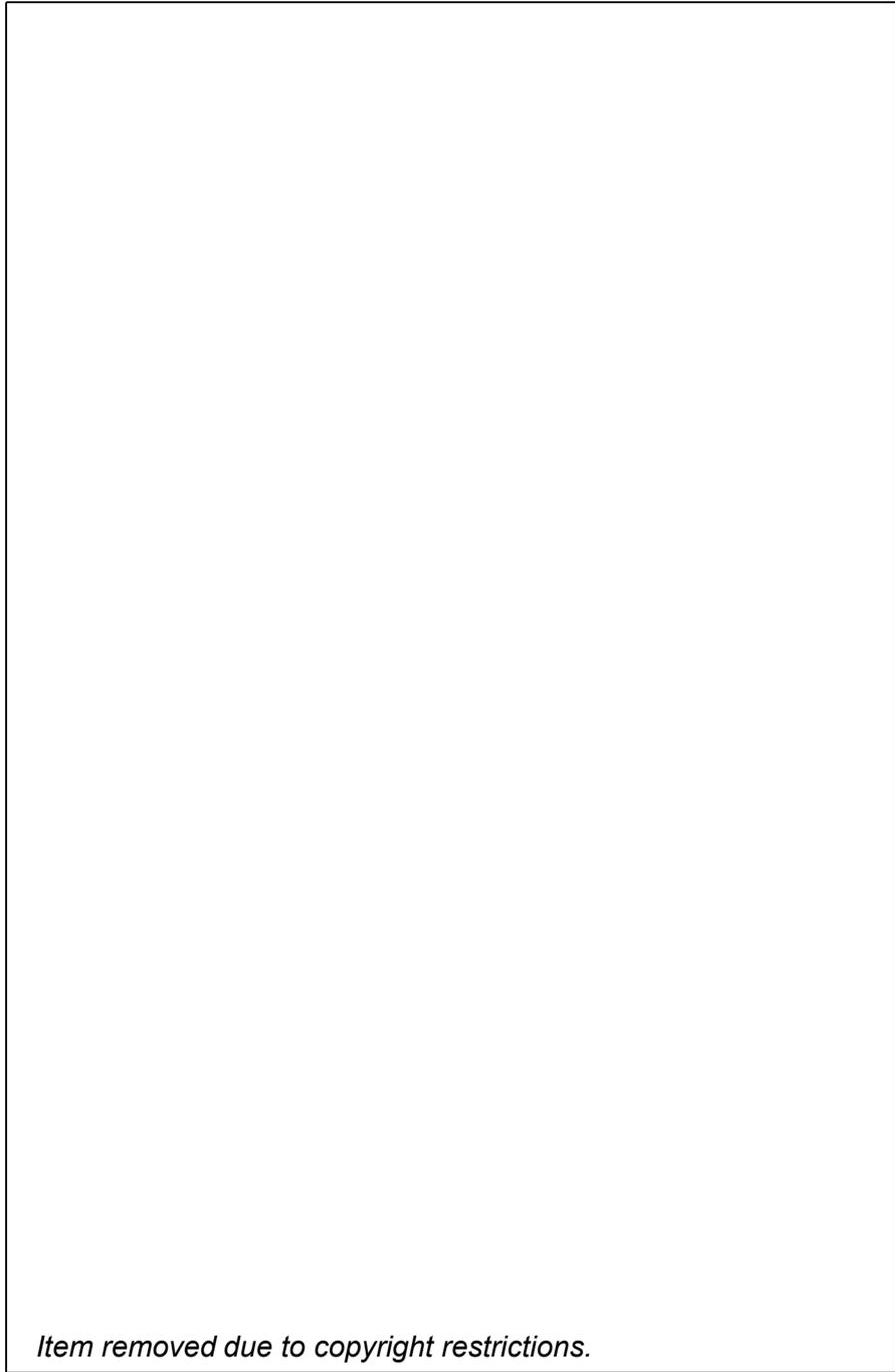
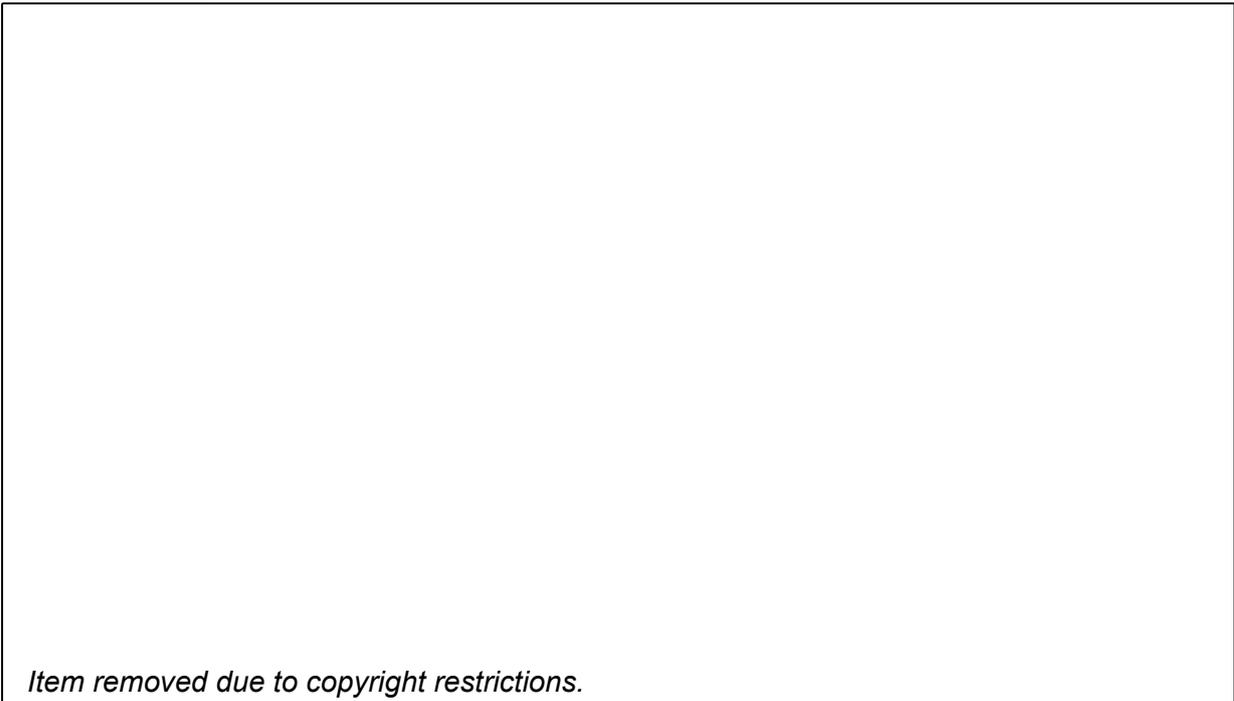
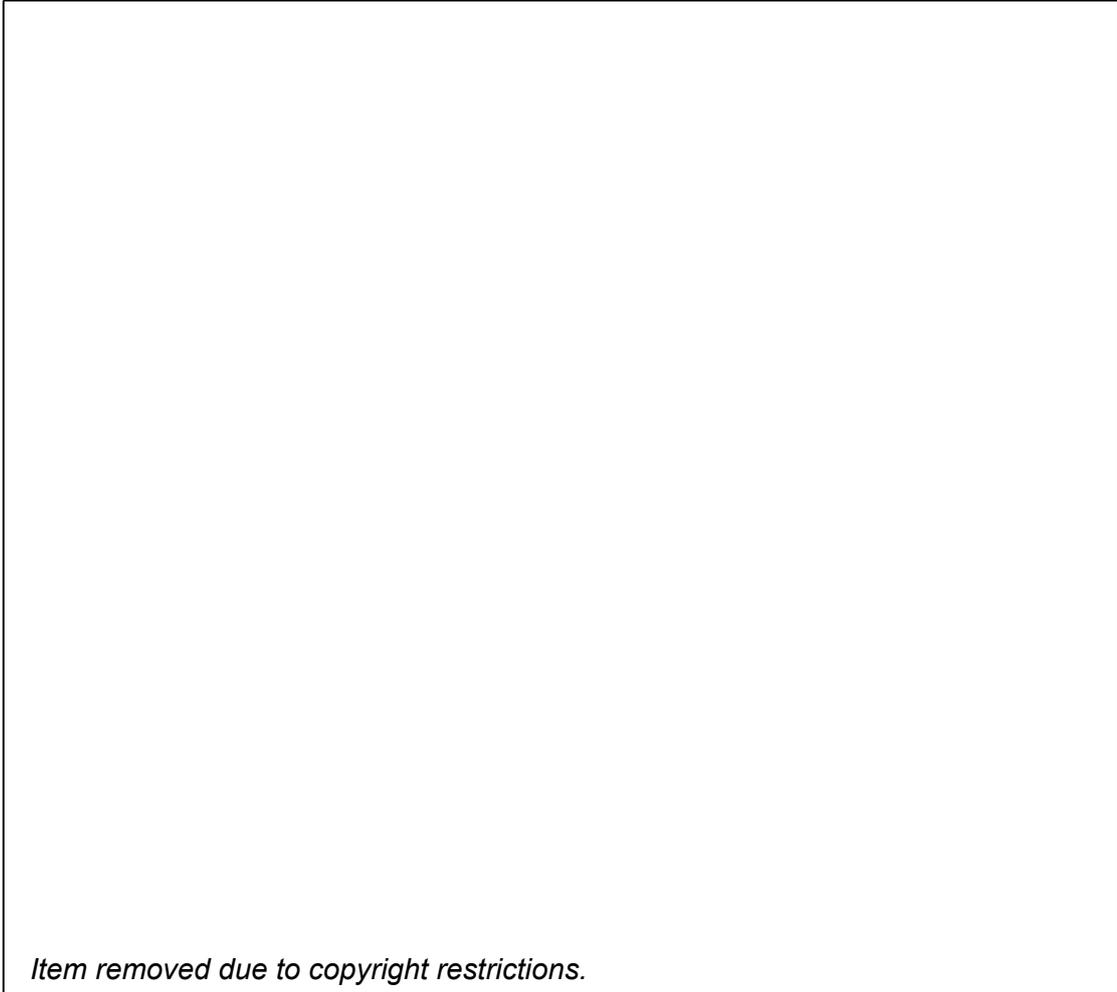


Plate 42: Aly de Groot, Practice installation of *Mutant Species* at Charles Darwin University, monofilament, glass jars, paper, 2008, dimensions variable, Photo by Aly de Groot.



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Plate 43: Aly de Groot, Detail of *Mutant Species*, 2007, monofilament, glass, paper, water, steel cabinet, dimensions variable, photo by Fiona Morrison.

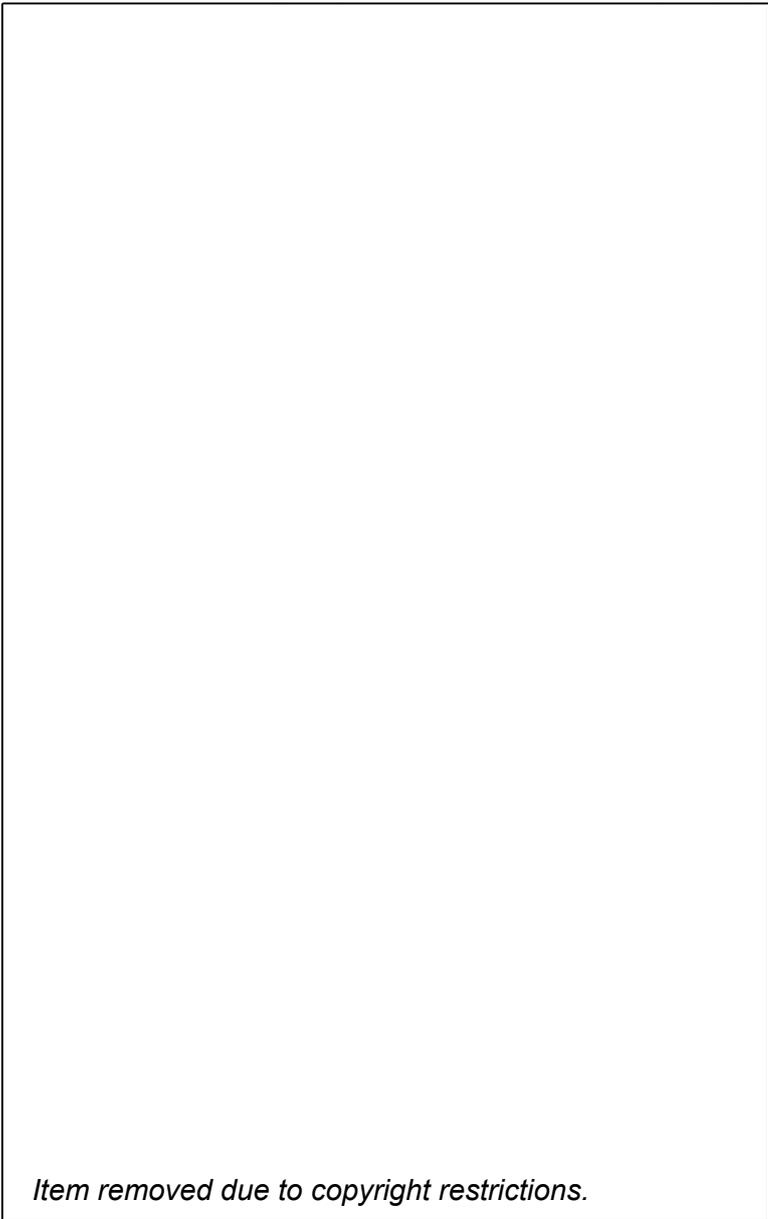


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Plate 44: Aly de Groot, *Exposed*, 2008, 13mm x 1100mm, cyanotype on paper,
Photo by Fiona Morrison.

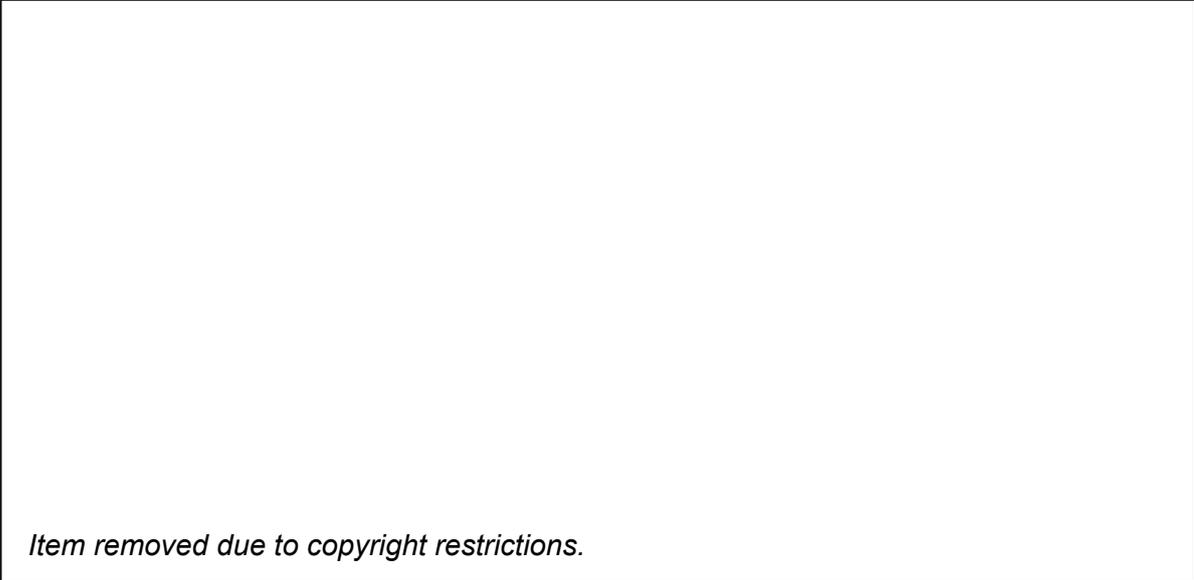


Plate 45: Aly de Groot, *Warning Signs*, detail, 2007, enamel pain, ochre, tree sap on board, dimensions variable, Photo by Aly de Groot.



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Plate 46 :Aly de Groot, Box Jellyfish, 2009, installed at the Waterhouse Natural History Art Prize at South Australia Museum, Adelaide



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Plate 47: Aly de Groot, Practice installation for *Signs*, at Charles Darwin University, 2008. Photo by Aly de Groot..

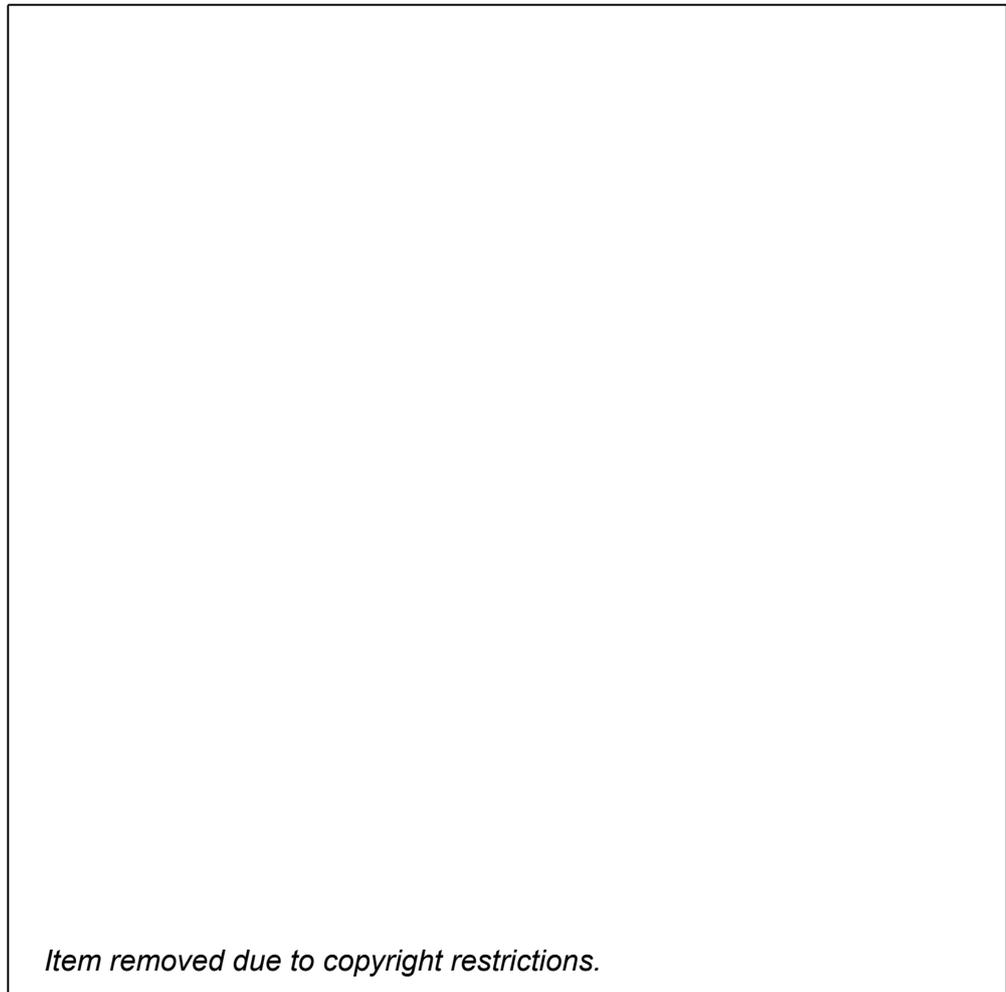


Plate 48: Aly de Groot, *Tourist*, 2008, Tasmanian Kelp, grevillea leaves, monofilament, varying sizes, Photo by Aly de Groot.

6. Conclusion

Fibre art is an art form which has played an integral role in Indigenous peoples' lives for millennia. The techniques used and objects made are diverse and regional, depending on where the maker lives and what plant materials are available to them from their immediate surrounds. Fibre plays an integral role in positioning female Indigenous artists as important producers of significant artwork expressed from a female perspective, which depict cultural stories, as well as contemporary issues that affect them today.

Since European settlement there have been influences resulting from cross-cultural exchange, which has manipulated the outcomes of fibre works produced by Indigenous makers. A major catalyst for this was when missionary Gretta Matthews transferred fibre art knowledge which she had previously gained from working as a missionary in South Australia to basket makers in Arnhem Land at Goulburn Island. As is the nature of the medium this information was rapidly disseminated across to the mainland, dramatically changing the basket styles produced by Indigenous basket makers across Arnhem Land, where they adapted and assimilated the coiling technique using pandanas. Plant dye information was also transferred in this way.

Until recently fibre, work and women's work in general has been marginalized as craft and deemed as less significant in comparison with other art forms. There have been many developments, which see Indigenous and non-Indigenous fibre artists exchanging, and sharing skills, resulting in a dynamic fibre art movement existing in Australia today. Non-Indigenous fibre artists such as West Australian fibre artist Nalda Searles and researchers and curators such as Margie West and Louise Hamby have been at the forefront of these developments. Fibre art is inadvertently political in the sense that Indigenous peoples have, often against amazing odds, not only maintained an integral aspect of their material culture but also developed the art form with flamboyant innovativeness and relevance to contemporary issues.

Previously only scientists went into museums but now many artists are using archival concepts to inform their art practice and establish cultural connections. The exhibition *Signs* is my personal response to my surrounding environment, inspired by my first sighting of box jellyfish to access museums which informed my practical and theoretical research. This has resulted in the body of artwork, *Signs*, which attempts to address environmental issues that concern me and my relationship with my direct environment.

I believe that through the exploration of plant materials, found objects and basket making techniques non-indigenous fibre artists can redefine the attitude towards the land, which was forged by our predecessors. Although many of these issues are complicated and extreme, often creating displacement and divides in communities, some people chose to work together for positive change in government and legislation and attitudes, whether it is through direct action or the chosen subject matter of their creativity.

As a contemporary non-indigenous fibre artist, I will continue to explore basket-making techniques along with plant fibres and man-made materials to reflect my developing relationship with this land and the traditional owners of the many Countries that exist within Australia. Through working, teaching and learning from Indigenous people I am continuing a tradition where Indigenous and non-indigenous people have exchanged knowledge, resulting in dynamic responses and developments in fibre art. I passionately believe that this is the nature of the art form to be shared and transformed, with each fibre artist developing his or her own narrative and approach.

The exhibition, *Signs* is my personal response to my direct surroundings from when I first saw box jellyfish when I was walking on the beach near my home. I have expanded upon this experience through visiting the museum and researching the myriad of ways artists have expressed their own relationship with places. In the future I plan to explore my Dutch origins by taking my art practice to the Netherlands. Although my father is a Dutchman who first came to Australia on a boat as a five year old with his siblings and parents in 1952, I have no connection or understanding of Dutch culture, language and art. Through my research as a fibre artist and working collaboratively with Indigenous people the importance of maintaining a strong connection with the surrounding environment has become apparent to me as a fibre artist. I therefore have an increasing desire to explore my own ancestry as well as the history of Dutch exploration in Northern Australia which dates back to the 16th when Dutch navigators spent several weeks on the North Coast of the Tiwi Islands. My recent work involves a response to the environment of my own cultural heritage, including research into representations of women weavers in 15th Century Dutch paintings and prints (Schneider and Weiner, 1989).

Future collaborations will include working with fibre artist, Janine Stanton whose creative practice is also heavily informed by her environment, incorporating most traditional mediums of art practice with a marriage between textile and fibre sculptural forms. Concepts for her work often deal with the interplay of isolation, home and travel. We have decided to work together as we are both influenced by the diversity of cultures

and the intensity of climate and landscape which pervade our lives in the Northern Territory. We first met when our paths crossed at a weaving workshop given by the Ngarrindjerri fibre artist Yvonne Koolmatrie as a part of the Adelaide Arts Festival in 2001.

We first worked collaboratively in 2005 in *Blind Date*, a joint project between two Northern Territory Artist Run Initiatives: Watch This Space and Darwin Visual Arts. Artists from Darwin, Katherine, Tenant Creek and Alice Springs 'partnered up' in a motel room in Tennant Creek to make works for the *Blind Date* exhibition which toured the Northern Territory in 2006. It was from this experience that we decided to work towards an exhibition together, *Head Miles, Between the Red and Green* at Watch This Space in Alice Springs in September 2009.

Head Miles will be the culmination of exchanges between Stanton and I and will be comprised of artworks made individually by Stanton and myself as well as artworks we have made together. We have been exchanging artworks and ideas since our first creative 'fling' in 2005. *Blind Date* was a dialogue between the 'head' and 'heart' and *Head Miles* is a continuation of the narrative between Stanton and I. With Stanton living in the desert and my base being in the tropics, the contrasts and similarities between our artworks comes together to tell the story of two women's experiences of living, travelling and working in the Northern Territory.

I am also continuing experimentation with fishing nets to make art in the form of a wearable art piece for the Alice Springs Desert Art Festival in August 2009. After using the netting to make sculptural 'baskets' for the exhibition, *Signs*, it felt like a natural progression to make the netting into a wedding dress for an oceanic femme-fatale. Box jellyfish form an integral element in the overall design for the piece which is titled *Ghost Net Bride*. Sea Turtles are one of the only predators for box jellyfish but unfortunately the turtles eat plastic bags because when they float in the sea they look deceptively like jelly fish. Due to warmer oceans from climate change along with threats to their main predator, the sea turtle, jelly fish populations are burgeoning and they are increasingly being found further and further south. On the whole, *Ghost Net Bride* remarks upon ecological imbalance and the need to preserve and focus on the riches before us rather than external, unsustainable distractions.

The chapters within the body of this exegesis- 'Women's Work', 'Saying It with Fibres,' 'Warning Signs' and 'Making Shift' weave the story of my environmental concerns and how I have created visual narratives to express these concerns to educate and create discussions with regard to local and environmental issues, specifically uranium mining and global warming. My respect and concern for the environment has been strengthened by my experiences from learning the preparation of native plant fibres and dyes from Indigenous women, to make baskets and sculpture. I intend to continue learning and teaching through cross cultural exchange so as to continue my relationship with the people and places I am fortunate enough to encounter through my creative endeavours.

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